

## Discussions: Art & Criticism in the Eighties

Because Toronto would not go to the mountain, *Parachute* brought the mountain to Toronto. The Montreal-based magazine had to bring the three-day conference on art and criticism in the 1980s (Ontario College of Art, March 16-18) to the communications capital of Canada, said organizer Johanne Lamoureux, because that is where you come to talk. The double-bind of this tale of two cities is that to get heard one thereby confirms that Toronto is where everything happens.

Yet it would be an extraordinary reduction to describe this conference as a conflict between two cities: Montreal busily assimilating post-structuralist discourse from France, Toronto longing for a country *A*. Even "art" is spelt with the difference between Lamoureux of *Parachute* magazine and Richard Rhodes, Toronto-based editor of the new *C* art magazine, there were many other voices, many other discourses.

Indeed, it seemed that Richard Rhodes had a rough time of it. The highlights of the three days of discussion can be described in terms of the *trace* or shadow that is the beloved of the post-structuralists, or in terms of an on-going activity or practice. The first neo-phenomenon painting seen by John Scott was spray-painted on a Detroit store window and it survived three minutes until the glass was smashed by a rock or a bullet. The first slide shown at this conference was a lingering gay parade pornographic image show by Tim Guest. My own memory is the deep intelligent voice of Benjamin Buchloh. It seemed to embrace what he had to say. These are the shadows. Speakers at the conference repeatedly described our situation as unheroic, post-feminist and beyond revolutionary politics. The voices of *activity* seemed not to believe this. These voices are local and women's voices. John Bentley Mays and Philip Monk want a local and historical art criticism about the city of Toronto. And as yet another male-dominated panel took the stage on the third day of the conference an anonymous woman's voice said, "It's another boys' club."

"Richard Rhodes has been digging his own grave," said John Bentley Mays (art critic for *The Globe and Mail*), speaking from the floor. "I have come to help him." Rhodes had said to the conference topics set by the organizers kept us at arm's-length from the new. He objected to the blocking stance of such questions as: "The Burden of History: A New Amnesia?" and "Intentions: Mus We Mean What We Say/Do What We Mean?" He found the set questions irresponsible because the new art work, which provoked the conference in the first place, questions the stability of an art-critical discourse of external description. The value of intentions is that they are the personal striving matrix that is the purpose of the new art.

What is this "full weight of the work" to which Rhodes was attached, asked Mays. Art work is a *verb* and not a noun. It was suggested that what Rhodes was was a humanist grid or method instead on an appeal to "the inner movement of the work." It was clear that the effect of Rhodes' appeal to the full weight of the work is to postpone issues of cultural politics out. Benjamin Buchloh pointed out that Rhodes is trapped in a code or concept of essentialism. What is this "movement of the work itself?" There is no universalizing movement in history as we know it, he continued, only concrete and historical practices which can be changed. Buchloh himself is interested in such matters as the role of the audience for art, and the institutionalization of art work, along with the power that legitimizes some of what is produced. There are issues of production and control in the dominant centres and galleries. How are minorities represented in art institutions and discourses? The artist is a cultural interpreter, though all art does not have to do this (there is a place for transgression and even fun), and certainly other practices also do it.

There was an interesting contrast between the revised Kantian aesthetic proposed by Thierry de Duve and calls for a Toronto art criticism that is anthropological and historical. For de Duve, all claims to be a mere "description" of art are inevitably a hidden abuse of power. Unlike Rhodes, he does not believe in the possibility of such description. His project is to rehabilitate aesthetic judgement. Anything can and should be *judged* art. This is not a disinterested judgement. It involves the personal responsibility to say: yet this is art. Such judgements postulate a universality which is not the voice of everyone but a necessary and *impossible* universal voice. Such judgements are not final, but are themselves open to judgement. In an age that apparently lacks utopias, perhaps the small utopia that remains is that anyone could name or produce art. In this revision of Kant, we retain all elements except the postulate of disinterestedness. To say, "this shovel is art," is not a description, but a prescription. Art is not a thing. It is an operation of judgement.

In spite of de Duve's denial that he intends to raise a new universalism, it is difficult to see how such a project could ever mesh with the local art-critical discourses called for by John Bentley Mays and Philip Monk. Recent art in Toronto, said Mays, operates to create a pseudo-community among artists, dealers and collectors, built around the idea of the artist as victim. We must demystify artists' transhistorical pretensions about desire and subjectivity. A proper historical question might be: what are the structures in Toronto such that artists feel victimized? The answer, suggests Mays, is that Toronto is the most authoritarian civic structure in North America. At the centre of Canadian information networks, the city of Toronto is enclosed in rigid authority structures. In attempting to develop a local criticism for this centre of power, a weak and discredited language of criticism may be most effective. Mays suggested two possibilities: the critique of a culture of information developed by recent canonic theology, and a *fictional* criticism drawing on the bourgeois novel. For example, there is a specificity about desire and the city in the novels of Dickens. This example may provide a format for a local, historical criticism. Mays is himself writing, apart from his work for *The Globe and Mail*, such a fictional criticism.

The first slide of the conference was shown at the end of day one by Tim Guest. From the first of four exhibitions which he organized at A Space in 1983 on the theme of "Sex and Representation," the image was one of those slightly absurd classical Greek figures beautifully photographed a century ago by Baron de Gloeden. Someone said that it was what no one said is that last. What no one said is that this image at an international conference on recent art practice, still had the effect of a shock. It challenged, as did the exhibition it came from, the taboo on gay imagery in the cottage-industry period of homosexual pornography, de Gloeden's vaguely classical imagery remained an important prototype of gay porn until the 1960s. Describing viewers' reaction to the exhibition, Guest said that different responses told us something about the social order rather than about the amorous soul. It says something about the social construction of sexual representations that straight men were indifferent or worse, women found the photographs cold and forbidding (women's socialization into sexuality is surrounded by warnings and prohibitions), while gay men recognized the imagery even if they had never heard the name of Baron de Gloeden. Commenting that this was, and the three other "Sex and Representation" exhibitions, seemed to have little direct effect on debates in the women's movement, the gay movement, or the Toronto art scene, Guest suggested that that may have been because he offered complexity instead of immediate answers.

One sensed that Guest's presentation and later John Scott's description of his politics in art were heard and then promptly marginalized. Scott said that his primary identity was not as a painter. He had intended in the 1970s to be a Marxist theoretician of culture and the ideological. In those days to be such a theorist had seemed a possibility. He turned to art as a way of getting attention for what he wanted to say. A successful painting, like his recent cruise missile image, is one that is used in newspapers and wallposters throughout the city.

The project of elaborating a feminist art-critical discourse never really got off the ground. During the two hours devoted to the topic, sexuality was never once mentioned. Neither was the equally difficult notion of a lesbian art. Most comments were criticisms of male-dominated art institutions. Later in the conference, Joyce Mason, managing editor of *Fuse* magazine, criticized the material conditions of the conference itself. Feminist practice has developed an alternative to speakers on a platform. There are other models for communication than taking turns at being the smartest boy on the block and using Kant or Lacan. In institutions such as the Women's Cultural Building and Women's Perspective there is a connectedness of many social forms of culture and conversation about them. René Payant said, speaking from the floor, that this was unfair on two counts. It was unfair to invite people from the universities and then to accuse them of being intellectuals. As for the platform and microphones, he too enjoyed developing ideas collectively with a small group of people, but when there are 300 people at a conference, it is good to be able to see the speakers and to hear them properly through a public address system. The material organization of this large public forum was extremely well done. At this point there was a round of applause for the technical staff who were producing the conference as an audiovisual practice but were hidden from view behind curtains and screens.

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