



◀ Queen Street West
near Garnet Press Gallery

Beyond Performance and Permanence

im

walking along Queen Street West in Toronto, putting up these posters, and I notice after a few blocks that this guy is following me, pulling them all down. He works for the city, and the new by-law is that I have the right to free expression by posting advertisements for my band, and he has the right to take them down.

This is the kind of progress you have to settle for in the street gallery. My band may be a talentless bunch of dorks playing shit venues, but we still want to advertise, here in the free market economy of our northern banking mecca. The idea of immutable forces, such as for example city buildings, street grids, or council secrecy, seems to preclude the serious proposal of

a more dialectical, creative dynamic in this city. By this I mean a dynamic of activity in at least the artmaking community, in which certain unseen possibilities are regularly unleashed, and new ideas for presentation are recognized as part of the intrinsic nature of the activity.

Resisting the idea of immutable forces calls for a different creative process from those involving regular institutions and prestructured time-frames. Most importantly, it calls for a reassessment of issues of priority and whether one can influence the development of issue-related events (leaving aside the question of whether there can be issue-related events).

Doesn't this bring us back to the hard reality of the street and public space? The pragmatic reality of city by-laws? The

deplorable public sculpture in your face? I mean, what's all this dialectic stuff — this is the birthsite of hard-nosed Canadian banking realism!

I will describe the performance/permanence dialectic. The artist under discussion produces relatively permanent sculptures which make a striking contribution to new creative (and direct) action, as dynamic activity in the public sphere. The artist installs a sculpture; the sculpture has a "shelf-life" of a few months to a year or so (i.e., much longer than a private gallery show); the sculpture is eventually removed or destroyed (there are several acquisitive-suspects); and as often as not, the sculpture is replaced with a new one, installed just as securely as the last.

Thus, the artist is also involved in an ongoing performance of surreptitiously

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mounting these pieces in the public theatre. Passersby become familiar with the objects in this performance, and come to appreciate the changing set or scene. Even absent pieces are still demarcating a new cityscape.

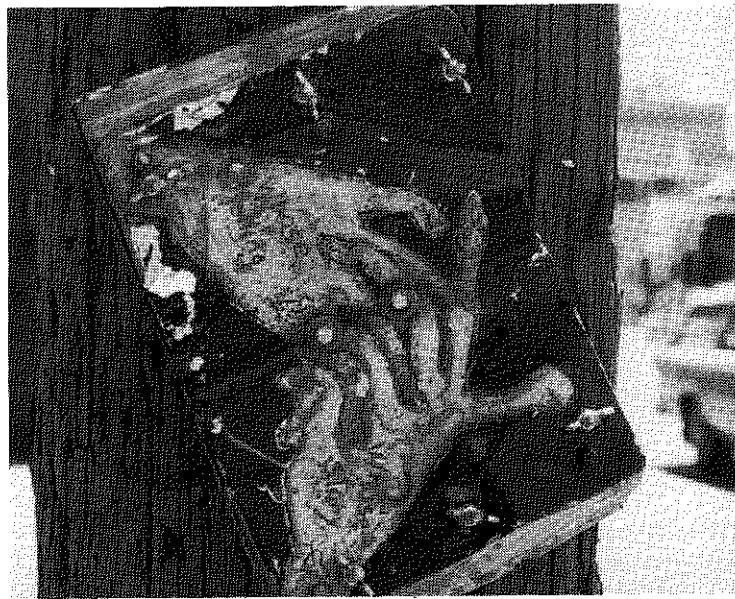
This process has been going on for at least two years. When I walk along Queen Street, I enjoy the expectation of an on-going synthesis of street and art. The mild tension of discovering a moderately transgressive and usually beautiful object heightens the effectiveness of the message of resistance, and legitimates the installation/removal/replacement of the piece as a real public dialectic over and above the perceived immutable forces.

The series of sculptures fall into at least two main thematic lines. On the one hand there is the body of work which addresses Western failings; and on the other hand there is the supply of artworks which themselves critique artmaking and evaluation as we know them through the institutions and galleries. Both categories, the socio-political criticism and the criticism of the institution of art, insofar as they are separable, carry the conviction of an activism which achieves an insight into the global city which no amount of city festooning could approach. In the context of this ongoing effort toward social justice and aesthetic freedom, projects like the cultural subdivision of Toronto into neighbourhoods with names like Bloorville and Little Portugal and Fashion District, or the ridiculous eyesore which is the proliferation of newspaper boxes, appear as they really are: pathetic freeze-frames of the static quo in an un-aesthetic and failed attempt to control even that facet of society which was formerly created fluently from inside of the cultures themselves.

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NEWORLDORDER ... reads a book-sculpture bolted open to the middle, shellacked into a rock-hard object, and machined into a telephone pole. The image is two fat men wrestling in competition. Further east on Baldwin Street are two more books — the books are always painted, shellacked and bolted open, silent except for the hand-brushed texts added over the glazes: AFTER YEARS OF TIGHT-FISTED COLONIALISM, NOTHING TO SMILE ABOUT. A hideous pair of lips form a mock Mick mouth paying service to the corporate transnationals whose interests are met by continuing colonialism. Could it be you this is addressed to? Other books along Queen Street display postcards of mounties, anachronistic fashionable couples, suits doing corporate handshakes, and more male bodies wrestling. Pedestrians exiting storefronts are faced down by strange objects, with no commodity value, confronting them with terse messages informing them (illegally) of the gross misdemean-

ours of their own society. SO I SEZ TO MYSELF, I SEZ, I SEZ TO MYSELF SO I SEZ TO MYSELF ... (picture of a baby reading).

a conventional art-object essence except for the fact that it's bolted onto the exterior wall of a gallery without the board's permission. The text, of course, penetrates



▲ Outside A Space,
183 Bathurst Street

Another aesthetic is the plaque, the vehicle of authority. The artist permanently attaches iron plaques to concrete walls in high-traffic areas. These pieces are difficult to detect if you are not on the lookout, because they appear, more than the books, to belong in the hodge-podge of stuff found in the street. One of the oldest pieces (which itself replaced another) is on the west side of the building which houses Pages bookstore. Etched onto its surface is a crude drawing with instructions towards making a Molotov cocktail. At Dovercourt, on the east side of the building housing the former cinema, a plaque indicates crudely the flow-chart for complaints at police departments. The chart is impossibly complex. On Dundas a sheet of metal announces that it is NOT TO BE TAKEN AWAY, and supports a b-side which has non-hip slogans like BE EMOTIONAL.

In addition to the negation of the negation apparent in many of these works, there is the self-critical discourse addressed by the sculptures which comment on art and artworld practices. Diagonally across from the Complaint flow-chart is a book attached to the west wall of the artist-run centre YYZ. Clearly strategically sited, this piece is extraordinary owing to the ornate frame which the artist has attached to the open book displaying a Canadian landscape (moose and map of provinces and territories), thus generating

further into the niceties of commodity exchange and colonial imperialist exclusionary tactics: WHOSE TELLING WHOSE STORY. The frame contains an artwork which can't even be pried off the wall, never mind sold for its perceived exchange value.

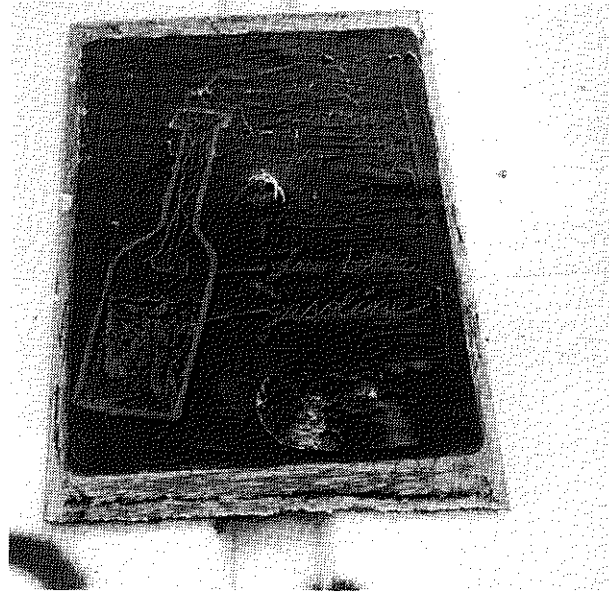
Another piece addressing native rights may be found at the Gladstone underpass on Queen. A heavy metal maple leaf suspended from the wall by a huge bolt-cutter proof chain is the ironic backdrop to another "whose story" sort of text. Empowerment is a strong theme in all the sculptures, and it is no coincidence that some pieces have found their way into the old Purple Institution gallery at 42 Gladstone, that bastion of an anti-authority grant-refusing space which carried itself along on the sheer creative energies of the members and guest artists.

The antithesis of the Purple Institution is the Ontario College of Art, the bastion of authoritative instruction and corporate soliciting (the cOCA cola campaign was overtly collusive). Four pieces, one of which remains at the time of writing, were attached to wooden posts behind Gallery 76, the space which exhibits works by students from cOCA cola college. In one of the artist's most beautiful works, a large glazed book displays a coat of arms consisting of a moose flanked by

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▲ Outside Pages bookstore (Queen Street West and Beverley Street)

a medieval Christian knight. The implications of cavalier tyranny in the context of Canadian icons is not lost in the text:

THOU SHALT NOT TRY TO MAKE
ART WITHOUT SUPERVISION

THOU SHALT NOT MAKE
BAD ART

THOU SHALT NOT MAKE NAIVE
ART WITHOUT PERMISSION

THOU SHALT NOT BE SIMPLISTIC

THOU SHALT LEARN FROM
PROFESSIONALS

The book-sculpture is well crafted and uses pleasurable materials such as black tar, copper, steel and golden paint supporting red calligraphy applied meticulously with a small brush. All in all the piece is outstandingly imaginative and sensually rewarding.

A trinity of smaller books formerly lined the south end of the Gallery 76 parking lot. With pictures of a baby reading, of a ridiculous happy couple, and

sketches illustrating artmaking procedures, one reads STARTING TO DRAW ... and, HOLD YOUR PENCIL ... and, SO I SEZ TO MYSELF, I SEZ ... and the enigmatic, POEPWRERPWOREP-OREPEEP ... Similar books are installed outside of 80 Spadina, 183 Bathurst Street, S.L. Simpson Gallery, Garnet Press (parking lot), all taking a run at the institutionalization of artmaking.

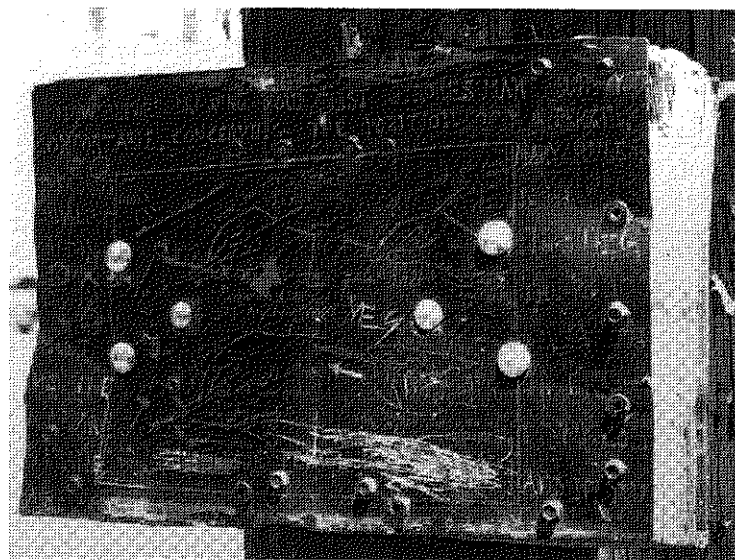
I estimate that there have been up to one hundred installations so far, and the artist seems as productive as ever. This effort represents a remarkably determined and sustained activism in the artmaking realm, a realm often tainted by compromises, coercion and economic bottom-lines. When I contacted the artist, he refused an interview and divulged no information about his work and motives other than explaining that his feeling was that as soon as a piece goes up, he no longer concerns himself about it in any way. The implication is that his artistic concerns operate completely outside the boundaries of a commodity culture. In my view, his work fits into a long and ongoing anarchist practice in Toronto, including the publication *Ecomedia*, the Purple Institution, Abattoir public art collective, the graffiti and courier artists, to name just a few.

Since the artist refused an interview, I was not able to find out where all the pieces are or have been. Thus, the subject matter treated here, i.e., corporate oppression, native rights, creative freedom, global politics, the environment, resistance, colonialism, police filibustering ... is probably not a complete list. I expect that there are pieces dealing more directly with women's issues, race relations, language problems, gay rights, rights of those suffering internment in psychiatric institutions ...

When the Rae government in Ontario was elected last year, the public mood was said to be ugly. The electorate was fed up with corruption and manipulative government tactics. Legislative inaction and Treasury lies were finally taking their toll on the collective consciousness of citizens of Toronto in particular. The upcoming city election is a late opportunity for people in Toronto to make their demands for policy from their so-called representatives. Whether it's by bolting your statements to the street or by storming City Hall or by converting your ward "representative," the dialectic of discourse must reach into public affairs to effect policy implementation. The public art discussed in this article is an effective invasion into a space where human beings and their discourses belong: the public space. It's time for dynamic activity to overcome the immutable forces which seem to constitute the city.

I'm looking forward to discovering the newest installations. *Omnis determinato es negatio.* ♦

Phil Kummel lives in Peterborough where two of his plays are currently being staged.



▲ Outside Gallery 80, Spadina Avenue

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