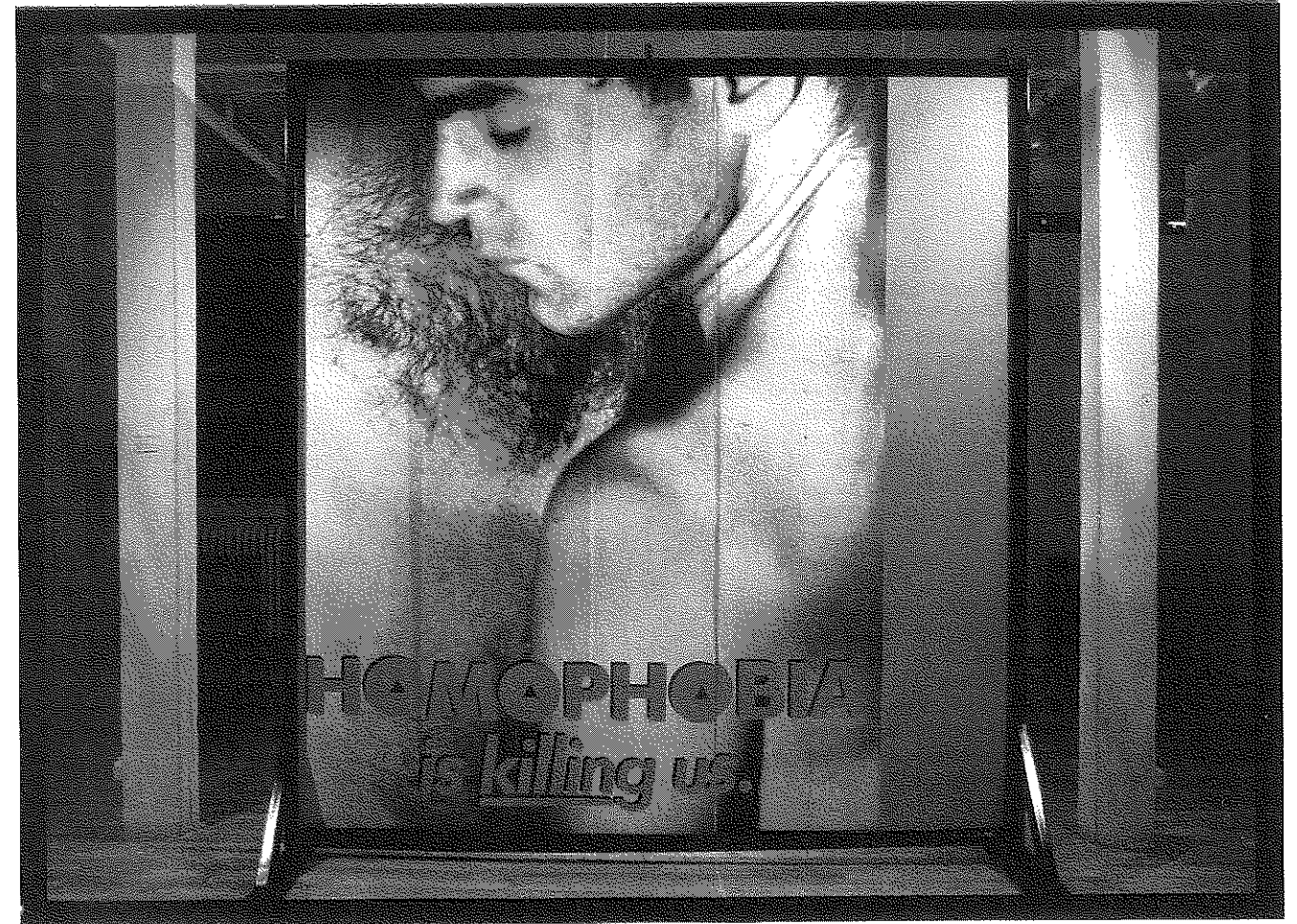


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**"Noreen Stevens, you are a menace to society.
You should be shot dead."**

(Answering machine message on my home phone, October 12, 1993.)

BY NOREEN STEVENS

When Sheila Spence and I tell the story of our visual arts collective, Average Good Looks, we tell it chronologically. I once thought this was for convenience, a way to make a complicated story more clear. Increasingly I understand that chronology - the linear march of time, one event methodically following another - is inherent to the nature of Average Good Looks.

Looking back I can speak conceptually about Average Good Looks as an entity and a body of work, as public art, activist art, advocacy advertising. But it began as one simple idea, one impulse, one project. Then one event followed another. We had no idea.

On Lesbian and Gay Pride Day 1991 a man was beaten and drowned in Winnipeg. There were witnesses on apartment balconies across the river who did nothing. Sheila wanted to respond to the incident, and in collaboration with Cal Asmundson and me, and with the support of Plug-In Gallery who funded the project and billboard space, the *Homophobia is Killing Us* billboard was developed. The only time I recall experiencing any foreshadowing of what was to come the three of us were sitting around Cal's living room. The finished design for the billboard lay on the table between us. Transfixed by the image, we were trying to anticipate people's responses to the billboard. Would they notice? Would they be upset? There had been very few art actions of this type ever made and certainly none had ever taken place in Winnipeg. We didn't know what to expect but I had a strong feeling that we just might be upsetting the proverbial apple cart.

And so the chronology begins. I faxed a mock-up of the billboard to Mediacom for a quote on printing and installation. They returned a quote as well as a comment on the tragedy of hemophilia. I sent the finished artwork to Mediacom and, for the first time, they got a good look at the photograph. They refused to print the piece, faxing a copy of the Taste and Public Decency Clause of the Canadian Code of Advertising Standards which says "advertising must not portray sexuality...in a manner which is offensive to generally prevailing standards."

We tried every approach we could think of but the Mediacom people were clearly not going to change their minds. A press release was issued and ironically the photo Mediacom didn't want the public to see was on the front page of the *Winnipeg Sun* the next day. The rejected billboard received a good deal of attention, locally and nationally. Mediacom was not being portrayed favourably.

Our biggest concern was trying to get the billboard up; no small feat in the midst of all this controversy. Our billboard had quickly become a hot potato. We did find someone; Freisco Boning, an artist/screen-printer who thought he could stretch the capabilities of his shop to accommodate something of this size and he knew a guy who would put it up.

At this point the story goes off in a couple of directions. We decided to file a complaint with the Manitoba Human Rights Commission against Mediacom for discrimination based on sexual orientation. At the same time, the billboard finally went up. Spurred by the attention it had already received, the installation was well covered by the press and the phone-line we had set up to record responses to the billboard was ringing off the hook. Four days after the installation the billboard was paint-bombed and the answering machine message was altered via remote control. We would later find out it was the work of the local Ku Klux Klan. Charges were dropped on a technicality.

Meanwhile the Manitoba Human Rights Commission offered to mediate a settlement between Average Good Looks and Mediacom. After a marathon seven hour meeting Mediacom agreed to install two more billboard projects for us, one on the Plug-In billboard and a larger campaign on Mediacom structures across Winnipeg. It was an enormous victory.

In June of 1992 we were invited to Passion Pink, an exhibition on the subject of homophobia at Gallery 101, in Ottawa. We mounted a clean copy of the billboard and the vandalized version which we had salvaged and edited the answering machine tapes for continu-



ous play in the gallery. I think it was beginning to occur to us that we were beyond one idea, one project. Average Good Looks was taking shape. We were onto something. We had **stumbled** onto something.

Homophobia exists because lesbians and gays are invisible and we choose invisibility because we fear homophobia. Or we choose to be visible. And in the high-tech, late 20th century world the mainstream media is the fast track to visibility.

Now we had a mandate: "Average Good Looks creates positive images of lesbians and gays for display in the public domain." And we were beginning to understand how our art could be a tool for social and political activism, how our ability to create visual images could be vital to a political movement that lacked visibility.

At Passion Pink we played our answering machine tapes for the first time and got a sense of their power and potential. Silence, like invisibility, is the enemy of the lesbian and gay rights movement. People don't understand homosexuality because they don't talk about it. It's taboo. It's systematically disallowed. With our phone-lines, Average Good Looks creates a framework which gives the diverse public permission to talk about homosexuality.

We had explored playing the messages in a gallery setting during Passion Pink, and the *Winnipeg Sun* had transcribed some of the calls for a story, but it wasn't until our second billboard campaign, *Lesbian. It's not a dirty word*, in December 1992 that we deliberately pursued the "dialogue". For example, we used the story of the billboard and the messages as a focus on call-in radio programs.

We understand, too, that the power of our banal images to provoke the obscenities, the death threats, the sheer rage that is conveyed on the answering machine is significant. Our choice to be deliberately unprovocative has, ironically, elicited the most absurd and irrational responses. Our third and most recent campaign, *gays and lesbians. our family, your family*, developed during a residency at the Banff Center for the Arts, perhaps best exemplifies our strategy. This effort, the final piece of our settlement with Mediacom, was installed in fourteen locations in Calgary, Edmonton, Regina, Saskatoon and Winnipeg in August 1993, with local phone-lines in each city.

Sheila and I have talked often of various ways to use the answering machine tapes, hours and hours of raw material and endless possibilities. Currently Margo Charlton, Artistic Director of the Popular Theatre Alliance of Manitoba is collaborating with video artist Hope Peterson and musician Marilyn Lerner on an experimental interactive theatre piece which builds upon the answering machine tapes. Called *Hangup*, it will debut November 27, 1993, as part of *Testing Ground*, Venue VIII, Winnipeg.

The Average Good Looks story is now up to date. I know things now I never thought I'd know three years ago. I know about the Ladies Auxilliary of the Ku Klux Klan. I know how to talk to the media and not get butterflies. I know it takes two days to hand paint an eight by ten foot billboard.

And I know that Average Good Looks is making a difference because, for all the jerks and zealots that call the answering machines, there are many others who say thank you.

Noreen Stevens is a Winnipeg-based visual artist, and a member, with Sheila Spence, of Average Good Looks.