

Mountain Standard Time Calgary, AB

Grand Action

by Donna Wawzonek

The first incarnation of this essay included interjections and sidebars that described and listed everyone that I knew and met during this conference, specifically on a visit to Banff the day before the conference. Suffice to say, I know too many people to feel comfortable in the Canadian art world anymore. I hope that Grand Action made others feel the same.

At the panel discussion, my feelings from the previous day were reinforced. I knew several of the panelists and had preconceived thoughts about what they would present and what my own role was in this conference.

Daina Warren opened the panel with a discussion of four performance works presented by Grunt Gallery in Vancouver by Laurence Paul Yuxweluptun, Dana Claxton, Nadia Myre and Rebecca Belmore. Daina pointed out that important to all four of these works were the issues of witnessing and the reconfiguration of Western performance practice to reflect traditions related to community and participation. This idea of witnessing is central to my attempts to understand why I feel the art circle in Canada is so small.

When discussing Laurence Paul's Shooting the Indian Act, Daina described how the British audience was expecting a wild west/pow wow show. Laurence Paul explained to the audience that it was more important that they witness the act than that he be the one shooting the document. She explained:

"Individuals in the audience are called upon to witness the exchange of currency or presents offered to the family or relatives. His performance is one I see as very important because of the politics and history of Native culture and the historical atrocities that have been put upon indigenous cultures. The Indian Act document created limitations on how native identity is termed (status, non-status, Metis...) as well as any the restrictive view of this document is totally unrelated to how indigenous people view their own culture."

Rachel James introduced herself as the Chief Security Guard, hired by M:ST as surveillance security. Before the panel began, Rachel stood at the entrance to the auditorium in uniform with a cloth billy club, playing the part well, if you didn't know her. James spoke about SAVAC, South Asian Visual Arts Collective, an artist-run centre without a gallery space in Toronto. Their decision not to maintain a gallery space means

they are both more reliant on collaboration and more flexible in terms to the work they present.

Rachel discussed two previous projects of SAVAC, Peace Taxi and (GUARD)IAN that examined how South Asians are perceived by North Americans, specifically by their stereotypical occupations as taxi drivers or airport security staff.

For the (GUARD)IAN performance eight artists dressed in uniforms like the one Rachel was wearing, each with their own props and specific personas: lazy guard, guard on the make, whispering guards etc. at the Toronto Alternative Art Fair International Gala Opening. This project played on the perceptions of those attending the gala of the presence of East Asians at such an event. This was complicated by the fact that there were actual security guards there and Kelly Mark in her "Staff" uniform.

This performance worked well with the issue of witnessing and the confusion or conflation of audience, participants, and unknowing witnesses is especially interesting to me because if the performance of simulacra is successful, the performance of awareness would fail. That is to say, the performance was so subtle that the cloth accessories, like Rachel's billy club, might be the only cue to distinguish the performers from security guards.

Grant Poier, a Calgary artist and activist presented projects he had recently been involved in . He prefaced his presentation with a quotation from Jean-Christophe Amman.

"Radically seen, an artist who works in the public space must aim for the point at which his work as such is no longer noticeable... Art in the public space... must be powerfully present, yet also able to "disappear"..."

In 1991 fifteen artists from Canada, Switzerland, England, Ethiopia, the US and Spain were invited to present work outside of the Helmhaus Galleries, Zurich. Several artists claimed a traffic island near the gallery to activate a space for art and discourse. By coincidence, an anti-smog demonstration was taking place a couple blocks away and riot police were using force and tear gas to push the crowd in the direction of the performance space. As the crowd converged on the traffic island it was oddly ignored by the police and Grant described it as an art space becoming a safe zone, which Grant interpreted as a subtle protest in itself.

The performance in Zurich was cut short and the artists were advised by the organizers that they could stay if they wanted but it wouldn't be art anymore. Grant asks where/when does the performance begin, who are the artists and who is the audience and what is the distinction between art, activism, protest and resistance.

Janice Rahn, a professor at the University of Lethbridge, presented a body of research centered on graffiti. As she presented images of tags in Montreal, she described how her feelings of alienation when she first moved there sparked her interest in graffiti and how she began to seek out the artists. Janice has produced two videos based on her research

and her friendship with Other, who she traveled to Berlin with for one of the videos. Other spent his days in Berlin using found materials as canvasses, drawing on them and then reinserting them back into civic space. It was in this context that she suggested that Other witness the response to his work. Other planted a work he had done on a broken cell phone and watched as someone picked up the work only to discard it once they realized the phone was broken. So here we have an example of an uncompliant audience, a refusal to witness, or at least a refusal to witness by the artist's terms. Janice sees the work of graffiti as that of artists projecting their identity into a public space, using DIY technology.

Michael Campbell, also a professor at University of Lethbridge, discussed his teenage years as a 1980s punk in Scarborough, Ontario and being involved in 'zine culture, as Janice referred to as DIY technology.

Michael discussed storefront projects he developed in North Dakota and Lethbridge, where there are limited venues for the presentation of contemporary art. He received a grant from Walmart to set up a storefront exhibition in downtown Dickenson, where he installed little dioramas with inflatable clouds set to motion detectors. To activate the work, people often worked together, one remaining still to watch the results of the other person activating the work, in effect creating a dance in public space; in essence activating the audience, turning them into collaborators.

Ashok Mather, Head of Critical and Cultural Studies at Emily Carr presented a 10 point Primer on Performance Strategies. Ashok described how he went shopping for a performative experience the night before, along with something to eat, at a convenience store. He asked if performance exists where we look for it. As he speaks, he plays a video of himself sitting in his office captured with a webcam, to accompany his powerpoint presentation. In the video he is just sitting there staring, as if affecting inward contemplation and the image doubles his presence in the space.

Ashok discusses and interprets various relationships, beginning with the scenario played out in the convenience store among himself, the cashier and another customer. He describes this relationship of race recognition and self representation as part of dozens he engages in daily:

"What happens if I "pass" into a white world, not by any means because I become read as white, but because my racialized identity becomes more pronounced? I am not supposed to be there, so my being there becomes more obviously an act of transgression, but at the same time it allows for the overarching whiteness of the institution to insist upon its not-being-altogether white."

He describes his relationships with Caucasian co-workers (other professors) as obligating him to his otherness, while relationships with support staff (custodial and security) as predominantly Asian and curious enough to seek out the only Asian in the school faculty. He describes these encounters as taking place in a context of white sense and sensibilities. Even in his mirror the performance of relationships with Whiteness in that

the sensibilities of Whiteness are more powerful than being White. (i.e. a slippage of how we view ourselves and how we are constructed by other is essential to thinking about how these identities are performed).

Rajdeep Gill, curator in residence at the Vancouver Art Gallery, presented a talk purporting that curation should support all creativity on the planet, Planetanerity. Taking performance as his key example, he argues that cultural making is non-human centric and non-euro centric. He referred to terms of art history as intrinsically racist in that they signify points of Western history rather than all history or all forms of cultural production.

He sees the venues of art being policed by galleries, curators and academia. He discussed this in reference to justice and censorship. Rajdeep uses an example of two magpies he saw in the park the day before. He described their movements and relationships as a deliberate and intricate dance and their intentions as cultural-making. He suggested that any constructed context for art is in itself a form of censorship, shutting out all acts of creativity that are not embraced in that context.

With Rajdeep being the last speaker, most of the discussion that followed was related to questions of expanding the types of work included in such event as M:ST and how, as presenters of performance, we can expand what types of work were included.

Much of what was presented at Grand Action related to a concern of expanding audiences and also expanding the type of work presented at performance festivals. In an ideal world, dancing magpies would be curated alongside Dempsey & Millan and Tayna Mars. But, until we address the issues of expanding the audience beyond the people I know, beyond the small circle of performance artists and presenters, I think the immediate issue of that of witnessing. Instead of striving for a "point at which his work as such is no longer noticeable" as artists and curators we need to find ways to expand the audience of performance beyond who we know and ask those we do to be more critically engaged—bear witness—to performance art.