

Truth or Consequences

I find it interesting that these two artists--Tass in England, and Ann in Saskatoon--are drawn to the same 11th-century embroidery, to speak about living here and now. That's what sparked the idea for this exhibition, and started me thinking about what else these works had in common.

Both artists refer to the Bayeux Tapestry. The Bayeux Tapestry is an embroidery that was made in 1067. No one really knows who made it, but it is quite magnificent. It tells the story, in pictures, of the Norman invasion of England. The characters in Tass' series of small tapestries, *Dying for it*, are borrowed from the Bayeux. If you look closely at the end of Ann's piece, *Ciphers from the Muniments Room: Arrival*, you'll see them there too--floating in the background, behind the words, like ghosts.

In Ann's *Ciphers from the Muniments Room: Letter*, the characters are written in Pitman's shorthand, the writing secretaries used to take notation in the '50's and '60's. Ann worked as a secretary, and the use of shorthand communicates part of her personal history and experiences. When I say the use, I am bearing in mind Marshall McLuhan's famous quote "The medium is the message." The way you say something can mean as much as what you're saying.

I can't read most of the shorthand, though I know one of the characters says "question." Another one says "misogynist." It is spelled phonetically, by piecing together syllables to make up the word (which was not included in the Pitman's dictionary). This piecing together of information bits, to make a meaningful whole, parallels everyday exchanges (e.g. conversation, commerce, computing). In this "information age", information has an exchange value. Ann's use of a language which only certain people understand suggests how this works--how the owners of certain information exercise power over others. It also hints that there are subversive possibilities in the use of language.

Letter was printed digitally by a company in Toronto that makes the type of banners seen in outdoor advertising--on football stadiums, government buildings, even art galleries. Ann's use of this medium illustrates that the control of information, is not only the realm of totalitarian governments. It is also about the way information is channeled daily, for example, from McDonald's, Coca-Cola or Disney.

Similarly, in *Dying for it*, Tass has altered characters from the Bayeux, adding contemporary symbols to them, to comment on our lives at the end of the 20th century. There's a recycling symbol, an hour glass, and blood spots. These symbols act as clues, and make me think about environmental degradation and health crises.

I enjoy the hand of God sticking out of the cloud on top of everything in Tass' piece. I read it as "the truth" or more simply "information," and, like the Church was in the Middle Ages (when the Bayeux was made), science is today's dominant ideology. We look to science to explain everything, as a default authority, and as an objective source of information. Note the science textbook illustrations of female anatomy that are part of *Dying for it*.

The magical appearance of this "information" out of a puff of cloud parodies the behaviour of information givers--government bureaucracies, the orthodox medical establishment, even the authority of art galleries in displaying works of prescribed value. That cloud, as a parody, makes me smile.

This is a similar observation to the one Ann is making in her use of shorthand. It tells me something about the way I receive knowledge, and about structures that control, and disseminate that knowledge--about the power that goes along with that (Ann's *Letter* is a written reply to another textbook, A.L. Burt's *The Romance of Canada*).

Both artists make references in these pieces which collapse time. That is, by referring to a range of particular times and places in history--the Middle Ages, the business world of the '50's, the Guy Lombardo music of '40's ballrooms in Ann's sound recording, the '80's and '90's in Tass' recycling sign, among others-- the work allows me to visualize information becoming history.

The use of woven tapestry by both artists, acts as a contrast to the transitory nature of information in today's media environment. Each pass in the weave records the physical history involved in making these labour-intensive objects.

If the Bayeux Tapestry is alternately social document, personal narrative, and colonial enterprise, it is not surprising that both artists have chosen it as a point of departure for meditations upon a number of subjects, among them, information, truth, and consequences. The work operates on many levels, traversing personal subjectivity, individual narratives, communication, labour, war, and health. By illustrating the relationship between these issues and our everyday lives, this work suggests the political dimension of information all around us, such as CNN, Air Miles, and telemarketing.

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