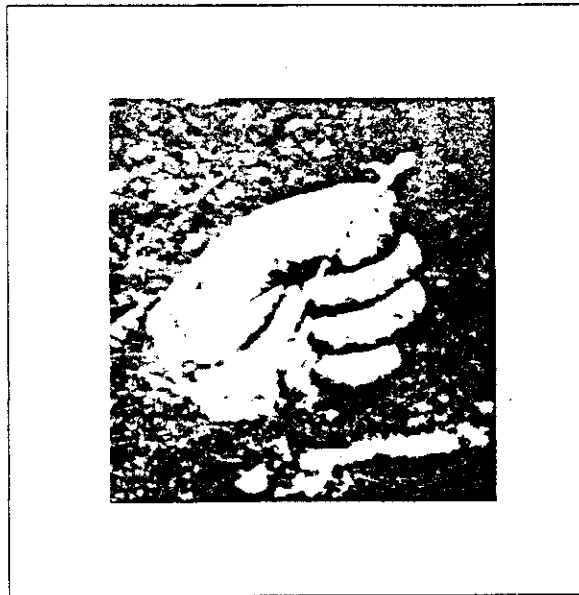


Michelle Normoyle
Or Gallery
Vancouver
September 2 to 14

Michelle Normoyle's clean, spare, and elegant installation consisted of three groups of black and white photographs appropriated from print media and enlarged. This distanced and reasonable exterior, however, contained a turbulent and intellectually complex centre.

The vortex at the centre of the piece, entitled *Key Actions*, is a multiple play on the word 'key'. She sets things spinning by providing, in place of an artist's statement, a list of dictionary definitions of the word, noun and verb. On the facing wall, as one enters the gallery, is a group of photos captioned with the title of the show, *Key Acts*. Each of these five photos shows a hand engaged in some kind of work, clerical, executive or manual. On the right hand wall are portraits of six substantial middle aged men of executive mein, ranged hierarchically like a corporate board, with chairman above and the other five in line below like department heads. This group is labelled "False Supervision". On the left hand wall is a long panel in triptych form, like an altarpiece with wings. The centre section shows three women at an antiquated telephone switchboard. The left shows a woman at a modern computer terminal, the right likewise a woman worker, though indistinctly. The image source for the right hand side also had superimposed type included the words "B.C. Tel". This group is labelled *Division of Labour*.

The reference to B.C.Tel is a subtle touch that puts these very general images into a shifting and delicately ambiguous relation to a concrete situation, namely that local utility with abysmal and widely publicized labour relations. The caption *False Supervision* can be read as a disgruntled employee's resentment of the boss, and also as a reference to B.C.Tel's practice of hiring large numbers of "supervisors" who replace workers during a strike. On one level the caption *Division of Labour* refers to the common practice in the communications and service industries of filling menial jobs with women and reserving supervisory positions for men.



Michelle Normoyle, *Key Actions* from the series *Key Actions* (1985), gelatin-silver print, 37.5 x 37.5 cm, courtesy: the artist

But the piece doesn't harp on issues of power and authority, it looks below the surface of social relationships to focus on the objective functions people must serve to make the economic machinery hum. Hence the central group of *Key Acts*.

At the core of the piece is a group of puns around the word 'key', and the key word seems to be instrumental for we are instrumental to the functioning of our electronic networks. Images of power relations seem to float serenely around the intellectual nexus of Normoyle's punning concepts, as perhaps our lives and our social relationships, although important to us, seem to float above and beside the demands of the relentless functionality of the information world which is ordering our time, forcing us to "look for work", always bringing us into harmony with it. The question of who has the power in a given organization is not really important, for to rise to the top is a mockery of self-fulfillment; all that has been fulfilled are the ordered demands of the instrumentality. One only gains power by surrendering one's self. Hence *False Supervision*. But although it may be fair to say that no one is in control, we are not wholly powerless, for it is still human actions that keep everything going.

Normoyle's little cluster of hands engaged in their tasks is a spooky echo of those heroic depictions of labour from an earlier industrial society, of man and machine striving in unison. If that world was built on divisions of class and sex, today's world is built on a division of labour between equal, and thereby equally replaceable units. If images of class and sex helped the old world to cohere in the new world, images of work reflect a dominance the more insidious as the workplace itself becomes increasingly classless. However, B.C. Tel has not really caught up yet. Women are still exclusively on the switchboard, as Normoyle shows us in her piece. The old forms of power still obstruct the ultimate achievement of economic rationality, and so these old political battles still contribute their quantity of misery to the world.

Normoyle's work has strong resemblances to another recent exhibition, Lorna Brown's at the (N)on Commercial Gallery last spring. Both use appropriated imagery of hands manipulating electronic technology, both distinguished male and female functions. But Normoyle is doing more than analysing the politics of work by appropriating its images and passively presenting them to us. Her cluster of definitions around the word 'key' give the work a literary element, and points up the choices open to art that wishes to be programmatic: that it must either become passive demonstration, or stray out of the realm of the purely visual in order to keep its expressiveness.

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Robert Linsley