

**In the Vernacular**  
presented by the Or Gallery  
Arts, Science, and Technology Centre  
Jan 12 - Feb 13

What exactly is this thing "the public"? Certainly there are a lot of good arguments for the assertion that "the public" is a social construct, used to shore up the bulwarks of dominant ideology. In another context, the visual arts, "the public" has come to mean "the uninitiated" or any group that is outside the community of artists, arts writers, art students, curators, support workers, employees of funding agencies, and so on, who comprise the "initiated" core audience, and collectively produce visual art.

As residents on the know-it-all side of the fence, we must occasionally attempt, for the sake of our own well-being or just to ease a guilty conscience, to reach out a hand to our know-nothing neighbors, the public. To this end, major civic galleries conduct subscription drives, boost volunteerism, and import blockbuster exhibitions; smaller organizations sponsor amateur art or art appreciation societies; and, especially lately, artist-run organizations sponsor "public art" projects.

After two paragraphs of sheer bumf, at least I'm at a point where I can start writing this review. I like the idea of *In the Vernacular*, really: artists who are aware of the semiotic complexities of both art and the mass media display works in windows on street frontaged within a block of the complex and varied window displays of Holt Renfrew, The Bay, and Pacific Centre. Further, the word "vernacular" implies that these artists are speaking the local dialect, giving the "public" of viewers who pass by these windows a chance to be something other than the know-nothings on the other side of the fence.

In this case, though, there seems to be no clear understanding among the artists and the curator of what audience they wish to reach, or even a common concept of "vernacular." It is interesting to note that Petra Rigby Watson's curatorial essay makes no direct mention of the fact that the exhibition takes place outside of a gallery, at street level at the confluence of downtown Vancouver's business and shopping areas, in a location which does not provide for prolonged consideration of the works (especially on a rainy February afternoon). Cornelia Wyngaarden's video installation *Blurred Lines* suffers from the same oversight: at any time, a viewer can approach this piece, look at the monitors, and possibly see ..... nothing. Aside from the logistical problem of showing videotapes to an audience which is rapidly passing by, the piece itself works reasonably well, but the people who are willing to stand and wait for it are generally the same people who would be willing to go see it in a gallery, so why misuse the window?

The other three works are without the particular problem posed by the video work, but use their context to limited advantage. Perhaps most successful is Ami Runar Haraldsson's photomural *Agree*: I could imagine seeing this on my way to work every day (let's pretend for a minute that I've got some dead-ass job downtown) and knowing every time what it is about. Haraldsson also comes closest to what I perceive the "vernacular" to be - the dialect of a particular place or people. Having said this, it is also fairly evident that simply manipulating a symbol from the business district's dialect is no guarantee of the work's criticality. *Agree* makes a nice photomural, but it would also make a passable corporate logo.

Michelle Normoyle's series of colour photographs, *Protocol*, neatly intersect with the guiding motive of the Arts, Science, and Technology Centre itself. These images, which optimistically portray technology and the system which maintains technological advancement, are already suffused with the oppressiveness of that system. It only remains for the artist to objectify the images themselves to reveal the hidden "protocols." Unfortunately this series grounds its subject matter in an identifiable past era, an era which mass media identifies as "optimistic" about technology and perfectibility, as though this optimism is still not used in different ways to justify similar abuses.

*The Canadian Frieze* by Nan Legate and Eric Fiss has the most tenuous relationship to "the vernacular" of any of the four works in this exhibition. True, a good case is made for various miniature buildings being a form of architectural folklore, or perhaps folkloric architecture, but the assertion by Legate and Fiss that these miniatures "document the history of rural settlement in Canada" reveals the misunderstanding at the root of this work's problems. Although they are sometimes representations of specific buildings, the miniatures are removed from their "real" usage, and made to look "nice." The real purpose of the miniatures lies in the use of the house as a symbol of completeness, security, and domestic happiness. The content of the miniatures comes not from history, but from ideology, as does the content of the "frieze" which accompanies these documentary photographs, a selection of "essential" elements of indigenous and "pioneer" architecture, presented as the essence of history.

Perhaps this might characterize the exhibition's overall shortcomings: in searching for the essential semiotic attributes of "the Vernacular," the real vernacular of the exhibition's immediate context and audience has been almost wholly neglected.

Keith Higgins

From: Artery

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