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Shadbolt, Carr, and Crack Cocaine:
the home of Real art

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by Clint Burnham

The user's space is lived, not represented (or conceived). When compared with the abstract space of the experts (architects, urbanists, planners), the space of the everyday activities of users is a concrete one, which is to say, subjective. As a space of subjects rather than of calculations, as a representational space, it has an origin, and that origin is childhood, with its hardships, its achievements, and its lacks . . . We should not forget that among the contradictions here a not unimportant part is played by the contradiction between the ephemeral and the stable (or, to use Heidegger's philosophical terminology, between Dwelling and Wandering).

Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, pp. 362-363

I'd like to talk about the Emily Carr and Jack Shadbolt show at the Or gallery, part of an outreach program by UBC's Belkin gallery, and what this exhibition says about the interaction between institutionality and the state in Vancouver art. For the past six years the Or has been located on Hastings street, opposite the Woodward's building. The area has declined, so the narrative goes, and the decline is subject to the way it is represented. It is important to see that almost everyone agrees on this narrative—it is a master narrative. The Downtown Eastside functions as a trope; it does not exist as described. Some activists, such as Bud Osborn, a former heroin user working to decriminalize heroin, turn to the trope of authenticity ("I once carried a hammer") to critique capital's and the state's demonization of the Downtown Eastside.

Let's spiral into this represented space—this "dangerous block", 100 West Hastings—into a struggle over policy and representation: crack or modernism, the role of institutions, the binary logic of "good space" (say, Point Grey) and "bad space" and ask, why all of this is necessary to bourgeois discourse.

It's very clear that media representations stigmatize drug users and dealers. In particular, the coverage of arrests in October '98 and January '99 focused on the ethnicity of those arrested (referring to their being Honduran, Oriental, or Canadian—as if the categories did not overlap), and engaged in amateur anthropologies, describing their clothing, baggy jeans and all. This feature of *Province* reporting, which plays up the way dealers look (like many people their age, they dress in the hip-hop style), allows a generalized fear of youth to be sutured to one specific version of youth culture. The ethnic subject, as immigrants and refugees, is constructed and vilified simultaneously. The class nature of Vancouver's regions, the way the Downtown Eastside and East Van are demonized, orientalized, and criminalized, aids in the ideological work of the media.

For some time, the middle-class patrons of the Or have been complaining about its location, because they do not feel comfortable among drug dealers and users. In the fall of 1998 the owner of the building (which in the past has been home to Artspeak, Kootney School, and gallery sansair, among other arts groups) doubled the rent for the gallery to \$2000. Evidently, the owner thinks that with gentrification speeding up and approaching from both Gastown and Chinatown, now is the time to attract more upscale tenants. The logic is confusing: why raise the rent in Vancouver's most dangerous block? The media sensationalizes crime to speed up the process of gentrification—as a headline in *The National Post* declares, "The hardest part about revitalizing an urban neighbourhood: Tearing it down" (Jan. 23, 1999, p. A8). So drug dealing is blamed as the cause of decline whereas, of course, it is a symptom of the squeeze play of the city.

In late 1998 Jack Shadbolt died. The timing of Shadbolt's death creates a neat alignment between theories of modernism and the city. That is, Shadbolt's art is symptomatic of the rise of expressionism; its incorporation of the indigene into regional modernism is a process as objective and obdurate as native workers being drawn into factory labour. Aesthetically, Shadbolt idealizes the labouring and scarred indigenes. Emily Carr's paintings, on the other hand, are still trapped in the scars of the Real. Via the cultural capital of modernism, Shadbolt's art synthesizes the regional aboriginal style and international formalism. Shadbolt was the crack dealer of his time, selling modernist artefacts in the same way the kids on the street sell drugs, and themselves, now. Shadbolt's death occurs at the same time that the postmodern crisis—gentrification, *not* drug dealing, has hit the streets of Vancouver. This crisis is nothing new. It is the neocolonial continuation of a trade that has been intrinsic to Vancouver since the 19th century. Again the marginalized are being repressed, this time by postmodern gentrification.

What I'm doing here is disarticulating the narrative of causality which describes the Downtown Eastside as a "bad" neighbourhood,



From **Vancouver Nightmare**, (A Tom Austen Mystery, Grenada Publishing 1978). Illustration by Tom McNeely

"ruined" by drug dealers. It's actually being ruined by capitalism, which causes drug trade to be located there so that the land can later be recapitalized. Three things happen at the same time: the Or's rent goes up, Shadbolt dies, the area continues to decline (which means more abandoned buildings and petty crime). Comes into play, the hegemonic ideological apparatus of the ruling class, and specifically UBC, which decides to position itself better globally by making regional connections (i.e. working with the Downtown Eastside). The Downtown Eastside is a virtual resource for UBC's cultural capital. Some of UBC's incursions are motivated by insurgent groups, like Humanities 101 and the Belkin gallery, who use institutionality in a postmodern way toward progressive ends.

So in effect, the Belkir/Or show of Shadbolt and Carr presents us with the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction. Start in Point Grey: while the Belkin gallery is "reaching out" to the Downtown Eastside with Shadbolt sketches depicting "the invasion of Point Grey", the student newspaper at UBC criticizes the Belkin for

being insufficiently grassroots. The Belkin is an alien body at UBC because it is too elitist, both in its architecture and by the fact that it doesn't show the work of undergraduate students who want to be institutionalized.

In a neat reversal of institutional theory, the Or's minimal elegance allows a "better viewing" of Carr and Shadbolt—creating both the simulacrum of a gallery and a "return" of the work to its colonial roots (hence the title of the show after Joseph Conrad's fable about imperialism: *Heart of Darkness*). As Betty-Lou Fahlman and Caroline Mangosing commented, the art "validates" the gallery (as a small artist-run centre), while the Or and the Belkin gallery appropriate a postcolonial critique, just as Carr and Shadbolt appropriated native aesthetics. Carr and Shadbolt "validate" the Or which drives the Or out of the Downtown Eastside into Yaletown. For this exhibition is, at last, as a comment in the Or guestbook says, "real" art—the opinion of anti-installation folks evidently. Two visitors in January told me that it is

"real" art in the "wrong" place (as opposed to the Belkin, which is "wrong" art in the "right" place).

Finally then, the cultural event is interpreted as more "proof" that the downtown Eastside is in decline—drug dealers push out the gallery (whereas the Belkin "pushes into" UBC, "depriving" the students of a place to display their art). The show is an example of the progressive side of colonialism—in the dialectical sense in which Marx praised capitalism. Here capitalism "uses" culture and the lumpenproletariat to destroy what it wants to build again. The difference between gentrification and modernism is that now "tearing it down" can just be virtual, accomplished via the media, as what was old becomes neo again. Postmodernism is the theory, gentrification is the practice: the cut and paste, collage, intertextuality, sampling, quotation method of post modernism means that exposed bricks and beams signify themselves. If only drug dealers and users had the same privilege.