

correspondence

Ms. Embrey and Mr. Kahre:

Clint Burnham makes yet another contribution to the heap of incomprehensible cultural criticism in your March/April issue. This essay is so wildly overwritten yet seemingly devoid of content that it was almost laughable. What saved it from humour, however, was an undercurrent of arrogance that was completely unappealing.

Burnham writes: "Shadbolt was the crack dealer of his time, selling modernist artefacts in the same way the kids on the street sell drugs." Wow, pretty heavy stuff Clint. I used to work around Main and Hastings, and I can't think of anyone who reminds me less of skid-row drug dealer than old Jack. What exactly is your point? It seems to me you don't have one, unless it is: Shadbolt sold modernist artefacts. Drug dealers sell crack. Gee, they're both alike! What a profound correlation!

Later, Burnham complains of the common conception of the Downtown Eastside as a "bad" neighbourhood "ruined" by drug dealers. But in fact, the culprit is really capitalism, which causes drug trade to be there so that the land can later be recapitalized. Well, the problem is more complicated than that: a combination of economics, mental illness, child abuse, drug abuse, etc. If Burnham really expects us to buy his tidy little hidden truth, he's dreaming.

I could go on, but Burnham's work doesn't warrant a full-fledged critical essay. It's merely another example of muddled thinking and the needlessly difficult post-modern writing style (to use clear, easily understandable English is to lose face). If essays like these are going to have any power as argument, both the style and the thinking need to be clear.

Sincerely,

Adrian Livesley  
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Dear Front

It was fine to read Clint Burnham's article (*Shadbolt, Carr, and Crack Cocaine: the home of Real art*) in your previous issue. I am bored with the "dreamy" homogeneity of Front's editorial and advertisements. I fear that what I typically see in Front is what I see throughout Vancouver's cultural sector—a profound, selfish neglect for the needs of all members of the arts community.

The mass media demonizes the Downtown Eastside; the Belkin appropriates space; the Or walks; artists ignore... Burnham accurately paints a picture in which class blindness is actively perpetuating the decline of cultural resources in that neighbourhood.

The City of Vancouver's own 1998 report on the Downtown Eastside states that the few remaining cultural resources in the area should be protected and nurtured. The "Crosstown" area, with the former Or site, is included in the geographical study area. It seems action to protect the cultural resources of the Downtown Eastside have again been left to market forces. Only a decade ago, A.C.E. organized artists (many in the Downtown Eastside) to demand for our basic live/work space needs. That fight with the City was also taken over by market forces.

Too few words and images are printed in Front which challenge the assault on the cultural sector in Vancouver's neighbourhoods, and for that matter, in BC and across Canada. Please publish more dialogue and study of the gentrification of various neighbourhoods, and support artists in resistance by telling their stories past and present. Anything less we already have.

Irwin Oostindie

Dear Front

I read with interest the article *Shadbolt, Carr, and Crack Cocaine: The Home of Real Art* (Front Magazine March/April 1999). Clint Burnham speaks of "the narrative of decline" of the Downtown Eastside and that the area "functions as a trope (metaphor?) it does not exist as described." It is interesting to note that the City of Vancouver, albeit with a different critical assessment, has historically held the same view in relation to urban development of the area. It took great effort on the part of artist/activist Bruce Erickson to have the city place the words "Downtown Eastside" on city maps—words that were used to describe the area by its own residents

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(in contrast to the popular "Skid Row" definition that is used in tourist bus tours of Vancouver and by Vancouver residents in vague conversation). The city would have rather left the area as vague, unrepresented and unnamed – to be filled in by the surrounding economies of Gastown and Chinatown. In fact, a few years ago the description "Downtown Eastside" was rescinded and taken off city maps as an attempt to get rid of the identity of community in the area. However, advocates refused to meet again with city officials unless the name was reapplied, and this eventually did occur. At the same meeting between city officials and community members at Carnegie Centre where this issue was raised, City Planner Larry Beasley stated that citizens of Vancouver could live with between 20 to 25,000 homeless people on the streets and not even notice their presence.

I find it difficult to pare down the experience of living and working in the Downtown Eastside to "a master narrative." Consider the experience of artists such as Bud Osborn (who is not "named" as a poet/artist in this article, perhaps artists who are politically involved in their community through direct action are not considered "authentic?" I find the description of his work in terms of "the trope of authenticity" simplistic – it does not address the larger issues). Osborn struggles to improve living conditions in the Downtown Eastside, and indeed, did once carry a hammer (the hammer being a signifier of the life experience of desperation of drug users in an environment of poverty and societal abuse). He uses art as a political/social vehicle to draw attention to the horrific health conditions, poverty and political persecution experienced by many residents/the homeless/users in the Downtown Eastside. The act of "naming" experience becomes extremely important, since as pointed out in the article, drug dealers and users do not simply signify themselves. Osborn has often stated and encouraged artists and residents in the area who are pushed outside of the realm of contemporary critical theory and art practice due to barriers of classism, racism and sexism that if they do not create work about their experiences, there isn't anyone that's going to do it for them.

And then occurs the interesting question of the doubled rent of the Or Gallery – the article proposes that the intent of the owner is to attract "more upscale tenants." The Or is moving to prime real estate land in Yaletown, and it is hard to believe that the rent will be any less there. And what could be more "upscale" than the presence of a gallery? The prime motive for relocation is

mentioned earlier in the article referring to the middle-class patrons who complain about its location. The area is not being gentrified quickly enough by artists because of the presence of community advocacy groups in the Downtown Eastside. The Or Gallery was "legitimized" through the Carr/Shadbolt exhibition and through the culmination of years of artistic practice and exhibition on low-rent real estate land.

The question of the potentially harmful effects of the presence of artists in an area that at present is extremely vulnerable to gentrification is never really addressed in this article in terms of the locale of galleries. It is a well-documented fact that artists are the "signifiers" of gentrification in low-rent areas. Artists move in, self-renoate and open small businesses (i.e. galleries, cafés). As a result, upscale developers can now take advantage of the fact that an area is visually 'more inhabitable' to prospective middle-class residents. Often low-income artists are residential victims of upscale "artist" loft development, as drug users are often political victims of the huge economy of the international drug trade. There is a definite lack of artistic representation and participation in the creation of art that follows a political mode of resistance, such as that of artist Jenny Holzer during the gentrification of the Times Square area. Artists in the Downtown Eastside are often "community consumers" rather than active participants. In other words, there's a whole lot of taking and not a lot of giving back by many artists when it comes to accessing community resources and low-rent facilities in the Downtown Eastside.

In terms of the recent involvement of UBC in the Downtown Eastside, I doubt that altruistic motives exist such as "position(ing) itself better globally by making regional connections." It seems more likely that UBC is trying to position itself on prime real estate land in preparation for when all the low-income people are forced out of the area. Artists and students need to take more responsibility for the effect their presence has on a community, and become proactive in balancing the effect of that presence, rather than espousing appropriated themes, experiences, and assessing conditions based on limited involvement.

Irene Loughlin, East Vancouver

(Historical facts: the naming of the Downtown Eastside provided by Bud Osborn; the term "community consumer" provided by Ga Ching Kong – The Urban Youth Alliance)