

The estrangement of avant garde production from the general public has perhaps never been so complete than it is today; the avant garde continues its half-life as a dwindling free-masonry whose secret handshakes and elaborately encoded gestures seem designed to mock the uninitiated. Of course the *a priori* incomprehension (or, at best, contempt) with which the larger public has perennially greeted this production is also one of the sustaining myths defining the avant garde since the last century. But, in our present situation, strain has been placed on this relationship by the fact that the overwhelming bulk of the avant garde has become subsidized by the very public from which it has become so thoroughly alienated.

Recognizing this legitimization of avant garde practice under state sponsorship, artists and organizations within the taxpayers' patronage have employed a variety of strategies of accommodation and accountability. The dominant response denies any accountability whatsoever – the so-called 'arm's length' principle, in which the state owes (by *fiat*) artists and arts organizations a tolerable level of support, but such that art critical of the state can somehow flourish anyway (ie, a *very* long arm indeed). "In the Vernacular" is a good example of a

curatorial response to some of the complex issues occasioned by this art/public dilemma. Petra Rigby Watson placed the work of five artists in windows at the Arts, Sciences, and Technology Centre in downtown Vancouver. Unfortunately, in the catalogue essay, Watson seems to have little interest in the rich possibilities that such direct exposure to public scrutiny offers the chosen artists; instead

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she revives tired chicken-and-egg questions about the nature of postmodernism.

The closest she comes to defining her attitude to the public space of the exhibition is when she defines the show by way of its title, proposing: "A vernacular site is site-specific . . . what is modest and local rather than valorizing the necessity of an universal validity of judgement." In this equation the hapless pedestrian becomes a "culturally receptive" cipher, an agent of mediation between the hair's breadth distinctions of a debate of which s/he is unaware. If the work on display struggles towards some larger social scale, it is because it is able to emerge from this thicket of condescension and critical verbiage.

Only two works seem "site-specific" in an particularly meaningful way and, even then, the reasons for this go unmentioned by Watson. Arn Runar Haraldsson's *Agree* greets pedestrians en route to the business district with a potent series of interlocking handshakes; to be so graphically reminded of secret deals, golden leave-takings, and the pervasive presence of 'one hand washing the other' is good advice, well placed. Michele Normoyle's *Protocol*, a series of bright, colourful appropriations of photographs of scientific endeavour, is a clear and witty comment on the generally bogus gimrackery of the Arts, Sciences, and Technology Centre where it is placed. Watson does not mention that this piece contains the only recognition of the exhibit's questionable relationship to this peculiar institution where groups of children are offered a glimpse into the future as envisioned by the social planners of the Trudeau era.

The other works are more clearly gallery art and suffer in this context. Cornelia Wyngaarden's video installation *Blurred Lines* is visually arresting: three monitors perch above a mass of burnt wood and broken glass. The monitors show speaking subjects from resource industries against images of the natural world from which the worker draws his livelihood. Unfortunately, for my visits, the video monitors malfunctioned and the traffic noise obscured the soundtrack. Perhaps this interesting work will



be exhibited in a more appropriate setting in the future.

Stretched over two windows, Nan Legate and Eric Fiss' *Canadian Frieze* consists of a polyvinyl frieze above photographs of architectural details. A dense amalgam mimicking and commenting on the minutiae of rural architecture – birdhouses, mailboxes, etc – the overall effect I found a little disingenuous. The documentation of 'folk' architecture seemed clear enough, but the relation of the 'artists' to the 'folk' wasn't. Was the transferal of this 'folk art' into a 'vernacular' setting merely ironic, or was it documentation for a public context? The whiff of condescension this work gave off was slight but unmistakable.

In visiting "In the Vernacular" I made a point of observing the reactions of passersby. They were, as expected, generally dismissive or contemptuous, but neither the artists nor the curator should be held responsible. But, in some of the people who actually took time to look, I noted a far more disturbing attitude. They deferred to the artists as bearers of a hieratic meaning that could only be guessed at by 'regular' people. If the principals are not to be held responsible for this, it is only because the exhibition strategy did not differ significantly from any gallery-based group show. If 'postmodernism' is simply another strategy to maintain the inviolate categories of high art, then it is easy to see how the social realities it presumes to address can become



(above) Stan Douglas, still from "Female Naysayer #2", *Television Spots* (1987), colour video tape; (below) Ami Runar Haraldsson, *Agree* (1988), photo-mural on plexiglas, 61 x 287 cm; (left) Judy Radul, *Evolution* (1988), backlit black-and-white photographs on red and clear acetate in a light box, 170 x 61 cm, photos: courtesy the artists



theoretical conceits in search of funding.

Two shows that ran concurrent to "In the Vernacular" offer (amongst other things) different responses. Some blocks away from "In the Vernacular", the Window for Non Commercial Culture was given over to Judy Radul's *Evolution*. Although this is the first of Radul's visual works I have seen, familiarity with her as a performance poet prepared me for *Evolution's* *joie de vivre* and clarity of address: six transparencies of women artists are mounted in a light box. The women are all smiling, but their smiles are the defiant smiles of women who refuse to be fetishized or dominated by the brutality of the city that surrounds them. To contrast these images to the ads for strippers at the Niagara Bar down the block, or the stylized anorexia of department store dummies visible nearby, is to realize how well this work is contextualized in the public space it inhabits.

Stan Douglas' *Television Spots* is more complex and problematic. Seven 10 to 30-second films intended for a late-night television audience, the series has only briefly appeared in this form so its eventual career in the public realm remains an open

question. Yet, out of this provisional uncertainty, Douglas has created a gallery show that still raises questions of public response and artistic accountability. The films are shown on a video monitor, folded in and out of commercials taped off the air. The particular ambience of late-night viewing is absent, and being prepared contextually for the films must alter their impact, but they are very good and they point to new directions for the artist.

The presence of people rather than their traces lends a sense of intimacy and warmth to the spots, and this is increased by a loving and almost nostalgic feeling for the East End Vancouver neighbourhood where they were shot. The films (several of which remain to be realized) are documented by panels containing (unpopulated) production photographs and archly written, Beckettian scenarios. The black-and-white stills are crisp, as if the city had a thriving *film noir* industry of which these were production stills.

Continuing his description and decoding of the relationship of social and technological forms to perception, Douglas imagines a television where the discourse of viewer and sender is more than imagi-

nary, not simply predetermined. His intention is not, I think, to alter the flow of television, but to slow the flood of images to the point where the way they produce and administer meaning might be apprehended. Although gallery exhibition removes the *Television Spots* from the site of their intention, its attempt to enter public discourse using the primary means of that discourse is an important step in bringing avant garde methodology to bear on the larger social realities in which it is contained.

"In the Vernacular", four window projects, curated by Petra Rigby Watson. An Or Gallery project for the Arts, Sciences, and Technology Centre, Vancouver, January 12 to February 13. Judy Radul, Window for Non-Commercial Culture, Vancouver, February 1 to 21. Stan Douglas, *Television Spots*, Art-speak, Vancouver, January 16 to February 6; also included in "Perspectives 87", Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, October 29 to December 11, and broadcast over CHCH television, Hamilton.