

Vancouver Anthology

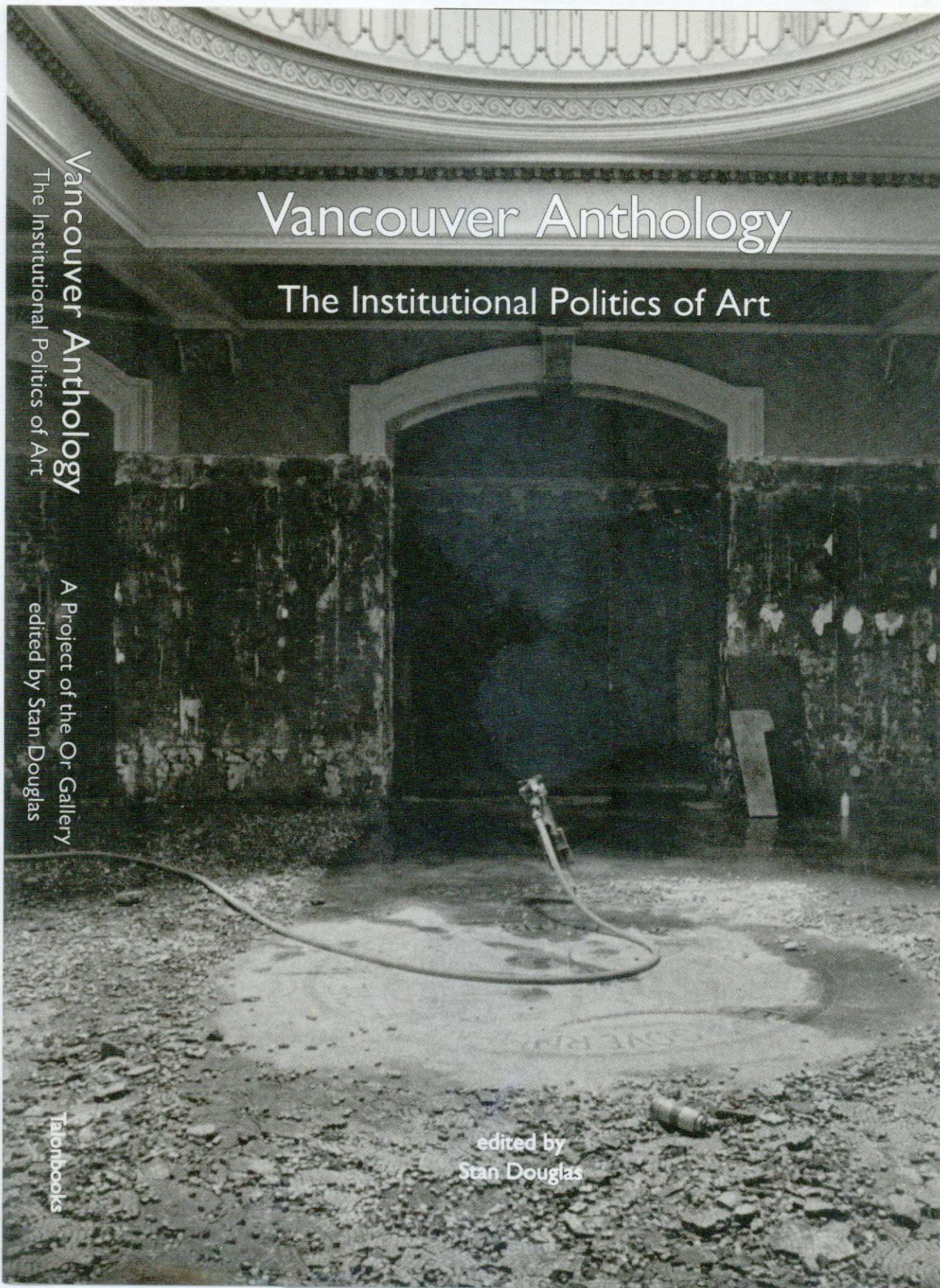
The Institutional Politics of Art

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A Project of the Or Gallery
edited by Stan Douglas

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Talonbooks



correspondence

Either/Or

I am writing in response to a lecture given by Carol Williams at the Western Front, October 31, 1990, for the Vancouver Anthology project, and specifically in regard to Williams' use of a letter, written by Laiwan and published in *Artery* vol. 2 Summer '88. Laiwan's letter was written in response to an interview I had given to the tabloid as curator/director of the Or Gallery.

I did not respond to Laiwan's letter for a number of reasons, from the personal, to the fact that *Artery* ended as a publication with this issue. I also felt, and still do, that the interview, when read in context with the letter, stands up well in comparison. I believe that the letter was a cheap shot and I am responding now because of what seems to me a cynical misuse of it by Williams.

The purpose of Laiwan's letter was to clarify certain points about the Or Gallery's beginnings, as well as to voice her opposition to what the Or had become. Some of the points she made were well taken and we appeared to agree on several issues, but her tone was oppositional. It became apparent, considering this and items such as her lifting of the term "self-inflicted marginalization" from the interviewer and attributing it to me, that the letter had less to do with clarification than establishing her own historical position, a privileged position of hindsight and nostalgia. Further, she used this position to establish her own revised premise for the gallery while mitigating the work and people who have been involved with the gallery since.

This brings us to Williams' tactical and cynical use of the letter. Its misuse is quite ironic considering her flatly stated position of questioning the procedure of the project, from its writer/audience position to her place in the historical ambitions of the Anthology. Clearly this rigour was not applied to her own lecture since her verbatim reading of Laiwan's letter would imply its unconditional validity. There was in fact no attempt to consider or compare the interview that had "spurred" the response in the first place. In short, her unquestioned use of the letter lacks integrity and manifests a methodology which she purports to be "inherently" critiquing. The Or is an easy target and the use of this letter so self-serving as to be at best little more than a personal attack and at worst a characterization with myself and the Or Gallery playing the historical heavy.

Phillip McCrum

Carol Williams' discussion of the Or Gallery and its 'history' struck us as a strategy that exhibited many of the symptoms that she herself chose to critique in her paper, namely, selective research, historical revision and co-option of other voices.

In her talk Williams stressed the need for multiple histories. To this end, and to "articulate [her] struggle with the . . . Vancouver Anthology", she chose to "recuperate" Laiwan's now infamous letter slamming the Or Gallery and its then curator Phil McCrum.

This begs so many questions it's difficult to know where to begin. First it posits the OR in Laiwan's absence as an historically revisionist, anti-feminist, totalizing institution that's forgotten and/or denied its own past and is not interested in any political manifestation of feminism in its present. This because Laiwan said it was so.

Laiwan was spurred to this outlook by a quote of McCrum's taken from an interview in *Artery* Magazine: "The original intent of the Or . . . (as I interpret it, because I don't have the authority to really state it categorically) was primarily to give artists working . . . with cultural problems of representation and language a way to show, to solve problems and to experiment. It was in a way against what it had become . . .". We truly fail to see how this somehow re-writes Laiwan's history. Laiwan states: "I really don't understand what 'it was in a way against what it had become' means." Later she ironically answers her own question: "It [the Or] should not be mistaken in any respect for what it was." Laiwan outlines the mandate of the early Or this way: "Autonomy was one curator-artist in residence to run the gallery for a year and then pass it on to a person of their choice for the following year. Any art that interested the aesthetic or politic of that curator (and that included work which was left, feminist, gay, etc.) would be shown."

The Or has developed, in that the curator is no longer in residence and stays for two years instead of one. The selection of a new curator is through consensus of the curator and board of directors. What effect this board, the resulting bureaucratization, and the money it has procured for artist fees and operations, has and will have on the gallery is a question that certainly welcomes examination. However, the curator still has autonomy, and this includes the right to show work that is left, feminist or gay.

So why must Laiwan's voice be 'recuperated'? Recuperated from where? Where is the 'official' history of the OR that has suffocated Laiwan's role? There are only two published articles which in any way frame an historical position for or of the OR. One is Phil

McCrum's interview, the other Laiwan's rebuttal.

It is Williams' use of this letter to illustrate a point of her own making that is perhaps most problematic, however. Laiwan has strong ideological differences with the present structure of the OR and with instances in its past practice. We may choose to disagree with these positions but no one has ever denied their validity. Williams on the other hand makes a blanket acceptance of Laiwan's criticism without investigating any other point of view simply because it fits neatly into her own conceptions. In doing so she positions Laiwan's version of the Or's history as a position in need of 'recuperation' and therefore as something ignored. Williams also assumes that Laiwan's history is the only valid one and that McCrum's is patriarchal, opportunistic and revisionist. Given that the Or Gallery has had seven curators and accommodated the changes that have arisen over the past eight years, we think it would be fair to say that there are many versions of the Or's history—all are partial, and all represent different and valid positions.

Sincerely,
Reid Shier
Nancy Shaw
Erin O'Brien
Mina Totino

Carol Williams responds:

I am pleased to see that my lecture at the Vancouver Anthology has stimulated responses which further emphasize problems of archival practice and any construction of public history.

The letter of Laiwan's (*Artery*, Summer 1988) that I quoted in the talk offered one version of the development of a single artist-run space, the OR. The information she offered contradicted statements made by Phillip McCrum in an earlier issue, and was therefore controversial, in relation to general knowledge about the OR. I felt that this visible contradiction was significant. The letter is part of the public forum and thus noteworthy in relation to my stated task: to begin to assemble or retrieve some traces of the feminist cultural activities within published remains. That this feminist impetus was part of the OR's origins is significant and not generally known. For that reason I, of course, felt it was worth repeating. I in no way desire to write the history of the OR. This is not my responsibility.

My point in placing the letter within the context of my talk was, as I stated, to localize important issues about

the practice of re-creating history and present the issue of absence with respect to feminist practice. My goal was to question why some versions of history are circulated institutionally and gain legitimation whilst others remain relegated to letters to the editor or to a question period, seeming therefore less authoritative or contestable. The messy stuff found at the margins of official histories offers up dissonance and contradiction. These complications are more interesting to me as a researcher. I think it is a curious symptom that once again issues with regards to women's participation with the OR are being discussed in letter form.

That two letters referring to my quotation of Laiwan's letter and to the contents of the letter itself appear here further compliments my opinion that any legitimized construction of history is fraught with struggle. Alternative views can operate to supplant the negative precedents of historiography, those which attempt to establish some singular, 'correct or truthful' narrative.

That some members of the OR board and past curator, Phillip McCrum, might perceive my actions as antagonistic, conspiratorial, vindictive or 'cynical' is unfortunate. With the exception of a brief statement made by Stan Douglas on the evening of October 31st, these arguments directly associated with my presentation were not brought to my attention at the public event when I welcomed such input (yes...my invitation was directed at women in particular but there have been, and are, women involved with the OR throughout its history). Nor was I approached at any other event that followed.

With respect to my understanding of the collective historic goal of the Vancouver Anthology I believe it a more productive strategy to confront disagreements head on rather than to stimulate an arena of debate that excludes the person most directly involved. I therefore accept the letters as initiatives to future conversations and look forward to less oblique exchanges with those parties. I personally have no interest in building fences within such a small community nor do I have a particular bone to pick with the Or, having always supported their programming. In 1985 I had the opportunity to exhibit there.

I have appreciated the feedback and input offered by those who threw all caution to the wind and addressed me with criticisms during, or after the event: Persimmon Blackbridge, Ingrid Yuille, Jill Pollock, Haruko Okano. I encourage others to contact me should they wish to view the chronology prior to publication. I welcome input and feedback. The process of archiving Vancouver feminist cultural practice in its diversity and ephemerality I