

PAVED Arts Gallery SKOL exchange

“Sprawl”

In a western and European contemporary sense, the mentality which actively forges into the land is one that arrives alongside of the oil age as an established given, and further, with ample space and means to become physically plied over vast territory. Here is a spread-out conception of urbanity realized with a butter-knife, the ideal being a variation of ownership dictated to by colonial values and actively colonizing horizons. For my part, having been offered the Artistic director position at PAVED Arts I conceived of the current project as a way to first-encounter just such a community, fully trusting to find a critical and engaged register. Given this trivial bit of background, namely the move from Montreal to Saskatoon, the temptation may be to focus on differences between the centers, ones that might account for so much cliché and platitude, or worse, *generalized* and *propagated* as *essential* cultural differences replete with preordained, over-arching social relations, constituted in a routine if vastly overdetermined, narratological manner. My own view is that such declarations serve only to over-simplify, a simplification that fails to account for the infinite differences to be had from within a single, given social milieu. It is in this very real sense that I wanted to approach our four artistic projects as idiosyncratic, ones that draw from and examine many different yet conversational singularities that cross over the work. Taken as a grouping the project becomes to develop the ideas that are producing interesting and perhaps compelling associations and relationships. This part of the project must remain open to everyone and anyone who would like to participate. Seen with the work undertaken by our colleagues at SKOL my only assumption is that this collaborative discourse will become richer, more textured, and still encompass only a selection from a potential universe. Throughout this enterprise there persists an undeniable backdrop, and, of course, this rectangular province has had its share of neurotic impulses and historical terror wrought by systemic racism. Still, I'm not going to try very hard to underpin the four artists on view with some kind of easy through-line, there is no central narrative to these four. What we do have, however, are four very critically engaged projects, each of which embodies an equally idiosyncratic and actively evolving political engagement. Like the next person, these artists are first of all children of their environment, whereby the real fun begins through an expression that develops critical thought. It is in this sense of play, in a 'permission granted' atmosphere of play, that the inter-relations of this work, of its many conversational attributes, take on so many possible dynamics. For the purposes of the present writing I shall limit my comments to a few thoughts relevant to each of their artistic passions. I hope that your own reading/viewing pattern will break up the logic of my structure and formulate many more windows onto this work.

Haunt

Here is a video treatment concerned with memory best expressed as an ever-changing dimension. Into her wilderness projections, ones that are cast onto suburban forms, Terry Billings has staked an investment in memory as a dynamic and evolving open system, the base form for all of our identity constructions that are, in turn, always under construction. In this sense her work is not didactic, but much to the contrary, speaks to a force of nature that resides under every surface, and is therefore precisely opposite to perverse notions of didactic containment systems. This is an unruly force, with the ultimate capacity for complete and utter revolution. Now cast against the molar conception of architecture that reactively mollifies suburbia, what is this infringement of chaotic disorder? In some sense these projections are as political as Krzysztof Wodiczko's Nazi reminders, but in this case more

concerned with an untenable fascist control that is meted out from within our proverbial back yard. Seething under the surface of all of this vinyl siding there is an ecology of monsters, devouring worms, writhing vegetation and foundational dirt. These entities reside as memory that enfolds both the figure of its past, the remembrance of the earth, and the inevitable element of the future, the inevitable return. Don't get me wrong, this monstrous conception of nature needs to be joyously affirmed, and as such tantamount to an anti-superstitious affirmation of existence. Billings gives us a projection that takes to the prepackaged contours of middle-class dwellings like a tightly drawn glove, and further an incisive screen foretelling of all the chaos that looms on every horizon.

Nearly Every Building In Dawson

It would seem that the very impulse to photographically document nearly every building in Dawson City is an absurd activity, and yeah, it kinda is. So let us explore this absurdity with the question: why should such an undertaking be considered absurd? It should be noted that there is a genuine register for a kind of voyeuristic pleasure that opens up with the work, literally thanks to Scott Rogers. Herein the absurdity is embodied by the artistic gesture, and, as it is quite absurd, there are critical implications that become the basis of our engagement. First of all there is a preposterous claim: nearly every building? This claim betrays the kind of bludgeoning that is required to sublimate an essence into a delineated representation, like a statistic or a census. All of the possible dimensions of what might constitute a building are thus flattened into a bandwidth. Rogers chooses not to deviate from the standard 4x6 print that comes rolling off of the belt driven photo-mat assembly line. To the contrary he hammers home the relentless, procedural character of a totalizing project. In this sense Rogers' gesture might be read as faux-Hegel, although I prefer to think of the work as downright anti-Hegelian. (Hegel's such an ass-hole!) In so doing the artist fulfils the two-fold promise of over-turning morality (and by extension the moral authority of dialectical reduction). First there is the ascent towards the lofty principles, in this case contained by a frontier conception of urbanity. Dawson City as content and background takes the form, as much by process as by representation, of an *ironically* normalizing, pedestrian, moral character. The reality is that the complexity of the situation will always surpass the most ardent attempts to generalize as such. And then there is the laugh riot generated by the pathos of being everywhere unable to adhere to the untenable moral ideals (values) that are nonetheless propagated. Look no further than the modest and demure residencies of this storied place for all manner of testimony to the foibles of the human, all too human, foibles that, after all, gained some international repute for being allegedly flush with gold. "Flush" is the exaggeration that infuses pathos into this work, and yet, lo and behold, it remains latently flush in problematic ways that extend to the not yet even imagined.

Stairway to nowhere

There is an absence of poetry in suburbia that can become almost palpable, nowhere else is there a stronger expression of the reactive forces that extol the virtues of normalization. Jordan Schwab's subtle building interventions, here related as photo-documents, venture into this desolate territory with a mind to bend perception. Underlying this movement is a fairly forthright appreciation for materials, taking up, more or less, the ethos of a fellow construction worker. In fact Schwab goes further, he adopts both the material and the vocabulary from the ubiquitous building trade sensibility that pervades the contemporary suburb in anywhere Canada. Into to this "matrix" the artist hopes to awaken those sleeping within, to nudge them with a slight gesture, suggesting, in this way, of possibilities from within. This is an important dimension of critical engagement that is too frequently over-looked, for as much as there

exists a poetic territory at large, call it the expansive horizon, there are also many present dimensions of a given experience that can be developed as a critical poetry from within short proximity. It is, in this case, a desolate little 3-step stairway to nowhere that Schwab proposes, more specifically one located in the “middle” of nowhere, in other words one that occupies this notion of “everywhere”. Belying such determinations however is the poetry that erupts from the absent domicile, and the force of pathos that can be implicated by its eventual manifestation. Schwab has given us the consideration of possibility that exceeds eventuality, he has placed a colon on the end of the sentence and left it up to us to fill in the object. In an age of cynicism we may come to the same-old, same old as being somehow inevitable. And yet, present, in the air, there persists all manner of creative possibilities that permeate the entire gradient of perspective and experience.

The Temptations of Doctor Antonio

What are the temptations herein alluded to with respects to Federico Fellini's famous doctor? The artist Biliiana Velkova is herself often projected as the object of desire in her work, taking on the role of the precisely groomed edifice, the outward and pushing chevron of a department store, or rather its divine model-subject. Pop-psychology rules this plastic domain, it is, after all, the promise of self-improvement that clusters around the base of every sales pitch. Along the way Velkova indulges in a playful, impish sexuality that promises so much “Bay-day” libidinal delivery, but always in keeping with the oasis on the highway. The central edict is clear: to have is not to consume, and the economy depends only on consumption. Driving into the highly constrictive, controlled, anorexic environment of such pre-packaged desire Velkova finds much room for mischief. Implicated at every turn are the superficial values of such garden-variety pornographic representations. To be clear, in deploying the term 'pornographic' I am referring to the simple premise of flattening a subject into an object in order for the consumer to have bodily dominion over said object. With what kind of everyday ease might the artist assume this role? Perhaps the very same ease with which we consume the product, one that is by its over-coded nature is very familiar to us. In fact it is the way in which we allow ourselves to be constructed by these representations, as a generalizing movement of capitalism, that forms the basis of Velkova's satirical rejection. At heart the entire proposition that drives through the middle of so much infantilizing media, that a complex, indeterminate, and evolving emotion such as love can be attained through a perpetual act of consumption, is here aped with just a note of derision. It must be added that a feminist critique of the masculine construction of femininity lends an acerbic edge to the proceedings. It is in this sense, that of the all too familiar conundrum of a male-assembled version of pornographic pursuit becoming the image that is sold back to women, where Velkova attempts to invert the power by taking possession of the codes. With a meta-textual flipping-of-the-bird the artist exposes the superficial pallor of such constructions, and invites all concerned to join her in this project of exposure and critique.