

Substitute City

Philip Monk

The simplest description of this exhibition would be: how Toronto appears in local artists' work. The city of Toronto, however, is not the overt subject, although it is pictured in all the works. Nor is the exhibition about architecture or urban planning, although one could say that the images in the exhibition are consequences of both. A subtler description would be that *Substitute City* is about how artists use and move through the city.

Architects shape our everyday perceptions, city planners regulate our routines, but artists cause us to rethink our ways of seeing and thus change our patterns of behaviour. Artists achieve this without disturbing a brick by posing representations of the city that encourage us to refigure our errant desire there. What doesn't the city satisfy that provokes this restlessness on the part of artists? Or, what in the city is changing that leads artists to question what is coming into existence? The often critical works in the exhibition offer some answers to these questions.

Everyone's experience of the city is individual. That of a bicycle courier differs from that of an agoraphobe. That of a sex worker standing on a street corner is unlike that of a john cruising by in his car. Each of these examples poses an opposition of movement and stasis. That one of them seems to chart a path that deviates from the habits of place does not give it value over the other. Paths are also habits.

Art disturbs our habits by charting new pathways, and thus leads us to new experiences of the city. But, it can also potentially challenge unwarranted and unwanted incursions, such as the expropriations of use and habitation forced on all of us by profit-driven development. The images in the exhibition are not just detached documentary records of specific places, but critiques of urban development, as well as testimonies, memorials, stories and maps of activities.

The cityscape of Toronto may be the direct or oblique reference of the artists' works, which themselves might be objective or subjective in emphasis. Not surprisingly, since the city appears in them, many of the photographic works seem documentary, such as those by Robin Collyer, Vid Ingelevics, Geoffrey James and Peter MacCallum. Some of these works belong to one-time projects that document an aspect of the city, as in Geoffrey James' photographs of speculative residential development in the 905 region surrounding Toronto, or as in Vid Ingelevics' photographs of his neighbourhood, which, in 1973, had a visually dominating high-rise apartment block imposed on its streetscape of, two-storey homes and businesses. Other projects are ongoing, such as Robin Collyer's computer-manipulated photographs. Through the simple technique of the deletion of all text from street signage, Collyer's photographs of Toronto city streets, among other things, radically alter our perception of our milieu and reveal the never-ending degradation of the public sphere by commercial interests. Another ongoing series, Peter MacCallum's photographs of the repair and demolition of the Gardiner Expressway, shows this imposing and reviled structure as a transportation system,

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Michael Awad, Adrian Blackwell, Karma Clarke-Davis, Robin Collyer, Danny & Reid's Motion Machine.

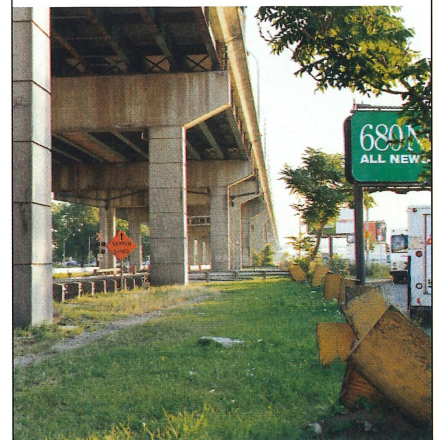
Atom Egoyan, Mike Hoolboom, Vid Ingelevics, Geoffrey James, Rose Kallal, Istvan Kantor, Peter MacCallum, John McLachlin, Leslie Peters, Seth, Kika Thorne

Curated by Philip Monk

The Power Plant

March 24 – May 27, 2001

Substitute City examined how artists incorporate Toronto as the direct or oblique subject of their work. Some of the images are documentary, while others map out private experiences in which the city itself, through the artist's infiltration, figures as a factor of desire.



Peter MacCallum
Gardiner East Demolition Project: North Side of Expressway, Looking West From Logan Avenue, August 2000
Colour photograph, 47 x 44.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Toronto Works and Emergency Services



Robin Collyer
Yonge St. Willowdale (#4), 1995
 Retouched colour photograph
 50.8 x 61 cm
 Collection of Mark McCain, Toronto

Michael Awad
Chinatown #1, (detail) 1995
 Colour transparency. 6 x 80 cm
 Courtesy of the artist

a piece of architecture, a place of labour, but also, for some homeless, a buttress for their flimsy, adhoc shelters.

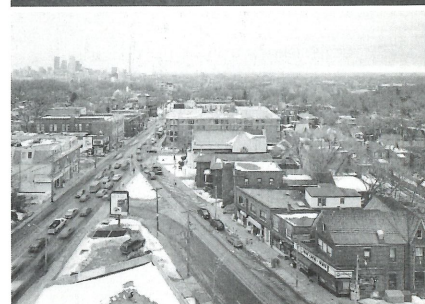
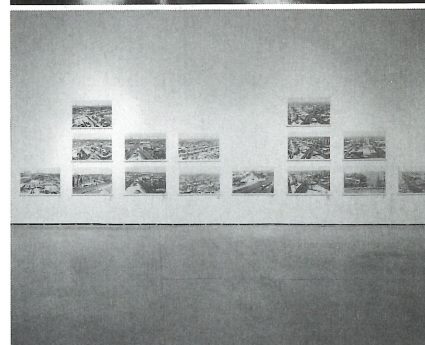
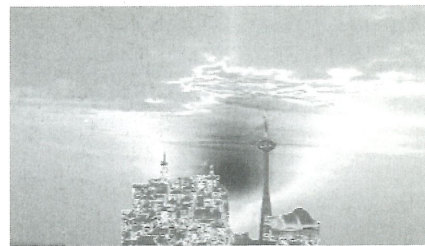
The to-and-fro between work and home defines the rhythm of our workday, and the interplay between the suburbs and downtown creates pressures that overwhelm planning theoretically meant to enhance our lives. The possibility of a place and what emerges through its squandered history is examined in a collaboration, based on Atom Egoyan's film *The Adjuster*, between Egoyan and Geoffrey James. (The corollary of spatial displacement is temporal change enacted within a place.) All too often the practice of city planning erases history. Moreover, its regulation of activity by means of zoning occludes space for an imaginative, utopian inhabitation that abandoned buildings, fallow industrial wastelands and semi-natural preserves allow. The documentary projects by the exhibition's artists are inseparable from an implicit critique.

This is not necessarily a pretty exhibition because Toronto is not a pretty city. But some of the quasi-documentary images have a poetic quality, such as Rose Kallal's nighttime photographs of industrial sites in portland Toronto. Reid Diamond and Daniel Bowden's collaborative *Danny and Reid's Motion Machine* (in which they take short Super 8mm films of city sites, splice them together, and compose organ, drum and guitar music to play live during the film's projection) can be considered an ode to Toronto.

As opposed to the documentary images, the works (which extend into the time-based medium of video) that are the result of a type of flânerie, of a seemingly aimless wandering, belong to the subjective pole of the exhibition. These works map out experiences in which the city itself, through the artist's infiltration, figures as a factor of desire. These works go beyond critique as they chart out pockets of resistance to the restless capitalization of the city. They transform our notions of the commonplace and the distressed, and in so doing change our consciousness, making Toronto a city we could love and not just enjoy – but not according to the aesthetics of a Paris, London or Berlin. In these works, each path is a narrative, criss-crossing terrain subjacent to our daily experience, collectively creating personalized cartographies of enamourment.

One might wander by foot or car. Leslie Peters drives the city's expressways, with her video camera out the window, sublimating that mundane experience in abstracted images. Michael Awad uses a modified reconnaissance camera whose panoramic images capture the fugitive movement of people in the street, but delete any stationary objects, such as buildings. The invitation that the trails in John McLachlin's picturesque photographs offer for quiet refuge is belied by the fact that the city parks and ravines they record are cruising grounds for gay sex. Meanwhile, in another part of town, underground cartoonist Seth's *Palookaville* comic books show him, like a peripatetic philosopher, wandering the city. A backdrop to the narrative, his loving portrayal of the fringes of the downtown business core is, nonetheless, essential to his lament for things past. Mike Hoolboom's *In the City*, a film about breaking up in restaurants, creates a specialized melancholy map of the city through places of disappointed love. In her video, Karma Clarke-Davis' nighttime wanderings of her semi-fictionalized devil persona register instead a cartography of disenchantment: is her flânerie a mark of possession or displacement?

Some works go beyond documentation to intervention, or rather document political interventions. Such is the case with the two films *October 25th + 26th* by Kika Thorne and *Mattress City* by Kika Thorne and Adrian Blackwell. Deriving more from the experimental than the documentary tradition, these films' styles are appropriate to the serious urban play depicted: on two occasions, in response to Days of Action (October 1996) and in protest against homelessness (February 1998), the adhoc October Group and the February Group created temporary guerrilla constructions in Nathan Phillips Square, which they activated or inhabited for the day or overnight.



Karma Clarke-Davis
DOOM EAGER: heavy duty. black., 2001
Video still. 45 min. Courtesy of the artist

Rose Kallal
Blue lights, 1998
Cibachrome print. 50.8 x 61 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Vid Ingelevics
Panoptic: St. Clair Place, 21 Vaughn Road, Toronto, 2000-2001 (installation view)
15 Fujicolor photographs on aluminum
61 x 101 cm each. Courtesy of the artist
Photo: Cheryl O'Brien

Vid Ingelevics
Panoptic: St. Clair Place, 21 Vaughn Road, Toronto, 2000-2001
Fujicolor photograph on aluminum
61 x 101 cm each. Courtesy of the artist

Geoffrey James
Construction: Highway 7 & 400, 1999
 Colour photograph, 101.6 x 122 cm.
 Courtesy of the artist.



In an aim to retool the city toward global economic competitiveness and local redevelopment, artists are among the first front-line victims. Now almost completely displaced from their downtown studios, ironically, they have lent an aura to condo “loft-living” or they have fashioned, originally out of need, the “aesthetic” of industrial spaces that dot-com enterprises now covet. Adrian Blackwell’s colour pinhole photographs document a number of studios/living spaces in a predominantly artist-used building after the tenants, himself included, were given eviction notices to make way for high-tech industry occupation of the space.

Much of the artists’ work falls outside the schema of production and consumption demanded by new urban economies. Moreover, it does not necessarily respect property rights. In changing political and economic climates, artists need to adopt new survival techniques. The ruses and disguises they insinuate are not unlike those of the little foxes and other animals that shelter and forage in city waste lots and ravines. For instance, Istvan Kantor’s video, *Broadcast*, is dedicated to the Wasteland group of young artists who infiltrate abandoned properties and create performance events there. *Broadcast* is a Sci-Fi simulation of like-minded artists’ tactical responses to a “deadly condo-epidemic” that swept through an unnamed metropolitan business district, which is actually Toronto.

We’ve all experienced turning a corner in Toronto and finding New York City police cars and Yellow Cabs waiting for a film shoot, or watching a movie and seeing local landmarks passing for other cities. The title *Substitute City* has multiple meanings. Negatively, it refers to the film industry where Toronto stands in for any other city (with the rare exception of films by David Cronenberg, Atom Egoyan, Don McKellar and a few others), or to the vague feeling among its citizens that Toronto is not a real city, in spite of, or more likely because of, its claim to be worldclass. More positively, it suggests the city that artists make for themselves, which lends a utopian dimension to their practice.

At a time of rapid urban change through development and speculation, the neighbourhoods traditionally inspiring or housing artistic activities are disappearing. With the downtown core given over to administered loft living and regulated entertainment zones, and the city’s peripheral, waste spaces destined for large-scale development, the time seems crucial to examine the role artists play in our perception of the urban experience.

Substitute City, curated by Philip Monk, The Power Plant