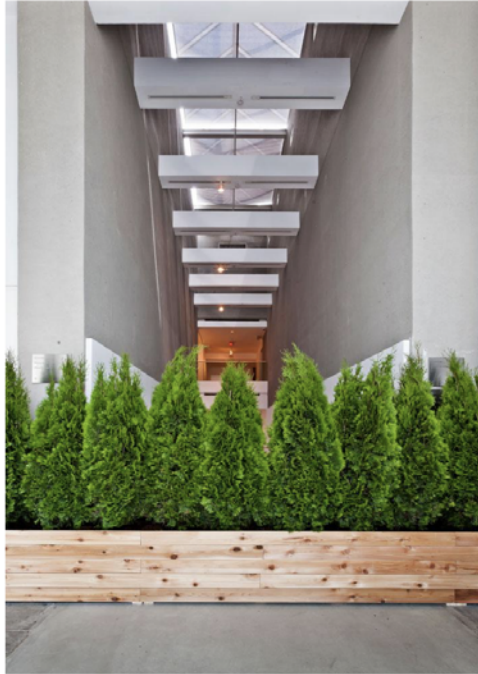


Tools for Conviviality: Social Works

Power Plant, Toronto Jun 30 to Aug 26 2012



by Ashley McLellan

From hospitable to hostile, the Power Plant's summer exhibition "Tools for Conviviality" examines ideas, frameworks and objects created in pursuit of effecting social change. Adopting the title of philosopher Ivan Illich's 1973 text—which guides Melanie O'Brian's curatorial framework—the exhibition expands the conventional sense of convivial tools to consider works that take up utopian ideals, as well as works that present dark, ironic statements on contemporary life. Instead of mapping a clear path forward, the exhibition suggests a variety of techniques which, at moments, offer potentially dangerous strategies for changing social relations.

Kyla Mallett's two related works *Helping Yourself* and *Seeing the Light* are the first works I encountered in the show. *Helping Yourself* is a poster-size version of the cover for the 1981 book *Being Yourself: 24 Ways to See the Light*. The rainbow-coloured shapes on the cover of the self-help manual create a sense of positivity and assurance in taking on the task. However, *Seeing the Light* confuses the book's contents, extracting supplementary diagrams but removing the text and leaving only clusters of shapes and patterns. Instead of instructing the viewer toward self-actualization, the work requires a subjective production of meaning, inviting multiple readings of its colours and shapes. Mallett looks to the past, but also alters it, to create a new framework for personal change.

Franz West's *Mirror in Cabin with Adaptives* (with Michelangelo Pistoletto) requires the viewer to become an active participant in the work's completion. West's "adaptives"—which here recall makeshift lanterns—await the willing participant to carry one into the newspapered cube. An accompanying video plays footage of viewers interacting with Franz's past installations, not prescribing a specific outcome but offering evidence of an alternative gallery experience.

Building on the notion of alternative gallery experiences, Swintak and Don Miller's *Graft* revamps the physical gallery space through the process of grafting—transplanting pieces of the gallery off-site and vice versa. A small wooden outhouse seems to have crashed through the ceiling and landed against a corner of a room. A small patch of grass and a walking plank lead up to the door, while two large boulders have also crashed into the space. Missing pieces of drywall expose the interior structure as well as a storage room on the other side of the back wall. Peeking through one of the holes reveals a video of a man rebuilding the white gallery walls in a clearing surrounded by trees. The absurd process plays with the perceived relationship of the gallery to the world around it, adopting a technique that suggests the (im)possibility of incorporating one into the other.

The Paris-based collective Claire Fontaine's *Change* consists of steel box-cutter blades welded to 10 American quarters. The curved blades look as though they tuck neatly into each coin, away from view, to be pulled out at the right moment. Another work by the collective, *La société du spectacle brickbat*, appropriates the cover of Guy Debord's influential *La société du spectacle*, which is used to wrap a brick. The ironic gestures bring forth a critique of conviviality and highlight the potential for utopian ideals to turn dystopian.

Blocked on one end by Abbas Akhavan's *Untitled Garden*, a long corridor houses two vitrines which display a gruesome collection of shivs. Akhavan's *Makeshift Objects* include bent and sharpened cutlery, a lighter and key taped to a razor blade, and a sharpened toothbrush; all are displayed like artifacts in the vitrines. Made by Akhavan, the weapons have not been put to use, but evoke the violent altercations they may be used in.

"Tools for Conviviality" considers a variety of methods and frameworks for enacting social change, and it also includes pieces by Raymond Boisjoly, Geoffrey Farmer, Reece Terris, Oscar Tuazon and Ulla von Brandenburg. Engaging all aspects of the spectrum, the works examine contemporary life and offer models for alternatives to social problems. Yet some works also present the undesirable means through which related solutions may be carried out—thus reminding us that social action can have myriad outcomes.