

CULTURE, ART AND DESIGN

Convivial Confrontations

The Power Plant's summer show grounds abstract philosophical concepts in the physical and public world

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Claire Fontaine's *La société du spectacle brickbat* (2006)

Ivan Illich, in his 1973 political philosophy tract *Tools for Conviviality*, spends a necessary chunk of essay defining exactly what he means by “tools” and “conviviality.” He uses neither in their colloquial senses. His essay is a polemic, an exposé of sorts, on the increasing over-specialization of industrial knowledge. For him, “tools” means every aspect of economy and industry in late capitalist society, and “conviviality” means not merely the interweaving of those tools, but the human contributive engine whereby people of all economic classes are drawn together inextricably for the better management of our working and economic and therefore everyday lives; convivial — a living together.

So it should come as no surprise that in [the Power Plant's summer show](#), which takes its name from Illich's essay, conviviality, at least in the colloquial sense of the term, is scarce. Most of the work isn't convivial at all: there are some pieces with utopian intent, but by and large, it's a collection of pointed, sharp, quietly contentious (and in a couple of cases, dangerous) work. Curated by recently departed curator Melanie O'Brian, the show assembles artists whose work engages with the public sphere in some way, whether it be towards utopia, critique, self-actualization, or community. This description makes the show sound broader than it is: in fact, it's a tightly focused collection, by turns confrontational and whimsical, and most of the time, meaty.

The show opens with Kyla Mallet's *Helping Yourself*. The first thing you encounter is a print of a blown-up cover of a self-help book: a radiating rainbow prism sits above the charmingly simplistic title *Being Yourself: 24 Ways to See the Light*. Then, further along, a constellation of framed images with various pictograms is displayed across two walls. Mallet has cherry-picked the diagrams from *Being Yourself*, removing almost all the text, leaving them to float, contextless, white against purple. Circles and squares and arrows, radiating star- and prism-shapes, dotted-line and solid-line arcs that end in arrow points all mingle and dance across the installation. It's a simple enough conceit, and through the abstraction of the images, something happens:

I began to stare at these randomized illustrations, knowing only that they were from a self-help book, in hopes that the titular promise of self-actualization might leech through these designs, that if I unlocked the secret pattern of these diagrams, I would achieve oneness. And then I laughed at myself and turned the corner.

Geoffrey Farmer's double installation orbits around the conceit of the Hunchback of Notre Dame. On one entire wall, there is a vast rainbow circle made from string stretched across pins. In front of it is a weird lumpy horn, some kind of putty proboscis that stands about six feet high. The horn is a metaphor for the Hunchback, a monster-creature whose shape will shift and morph throughout the summer: the gallery's children's programming involves having the kids collaboratively shape and add to the sculpture as the show progresses. The string circle is meant to reference Notre Dame Cathedral's rose window. I'm not entirely convinced by the strength and consistency of Farmer's metaphor, but his work is certainly among the most visually spectacular in the show.

Abbas Akhavan has two installations, both of which turn the idea of tools and conviviality on their respective heads. A long display case fills the hallway of the gallery's clerestory. It's filled with homemade shivs: spoons, forks, plates, toothbrushes, pencil sharpeners, rulers, shards of mirror and glass; a parade of tiny daggers. Akhavan has also blocked off the clerestory: a row of small pine trees extends from the western gallery into the eastern gallery, blocking off the central hallway and completely reorienting the navigational currents of the Power Plant. These little emerald pines are innocuous enough on their own, even picturesque. Akhavan has turned them into a limit, a fence, a border; a passive-aggressive policing of space; the velvet glove that hides the iron fist; the sweet smiling face of controlling authority.

Things get more pessimistic from there: the French artist-collective Claire Fontaine occupy the southeastern gallery with three snarling pieces: a brick wrapped with the cover of Guy Debord's *Société du Spectacle*; a processional of huge black flags hung from elongated gardening tools, each embroidered with a different slogan about the interaction of man and machine by French philosopher Gilbert Simondon; and a pile of American quarters with claw-like box-cutting blades soldered to them. Taken all together, it's a despairingly ironic installation, nihilistic even, although darkly funny.

The real show-stopper is in the last room: Swintak and Don Miller's *Grafting*. Grafting is a horticultural process whereby one combines vascular tissue from two plants in the hopes of creating a new hybrid. Swintak and Miller have transplanted a gallery wall from the Power Plant and installed it at Don Blanche, their rural Ontarian artist's compound; in turn, they have installed an outhouse, some large rocks and several pockets of grassy soil in the Power Plant (there's video footage interspersed in and amongst the installation of this transplanting taking place).

O'Brian is wise to have *Grafting* be her show's closer. Not only does it end the proceedings on an up note; of all the artists in the show, Swintak and Miller engage most fully with its title, with both the philosophical and colloquial meanings of "tools" and "conviviality." As such, they offer the most convincing answer to Illich's challenge of reorienting how we use our industries to engage with each other. Theirs is a beautifully utopian idea: the notion that a gallery is not merely a sterile display box, but an organic thing; that these two divergent chunks of architecture — a ghostly white cube and the rough-hewn toilet of a rural art space — could intermingle and generate some new species of living art space. Of course it's pragmatically impossible. But that impossibility makes the idea all the more appealing, and all the more exciting as an aspiration.

Tools for Conviviality continues at the Power Plant through August 26.