

SIX NEW VANCOUVER MODERN

IS A NEW GENERATION OF ART STARS ON THE RISE IN THE WEST-COAST CAPITAL OF CONCEPTUAL ART? KEN LUM WEIGHS IN WITH A PERSONAL VIEW

Not only has art within Modernism been rife with contradiction, it has been propelled by it. Calls for a new beginning in art have frequently been issued in unison with calls for the death of art. By rejecting representational modes predicated on realism, non-objective, or abstract, art aimed for a deeper realism. Arguments in support of the autonomy of art have always been countered by arguments for the conflation of art and life. And on and on it goes.

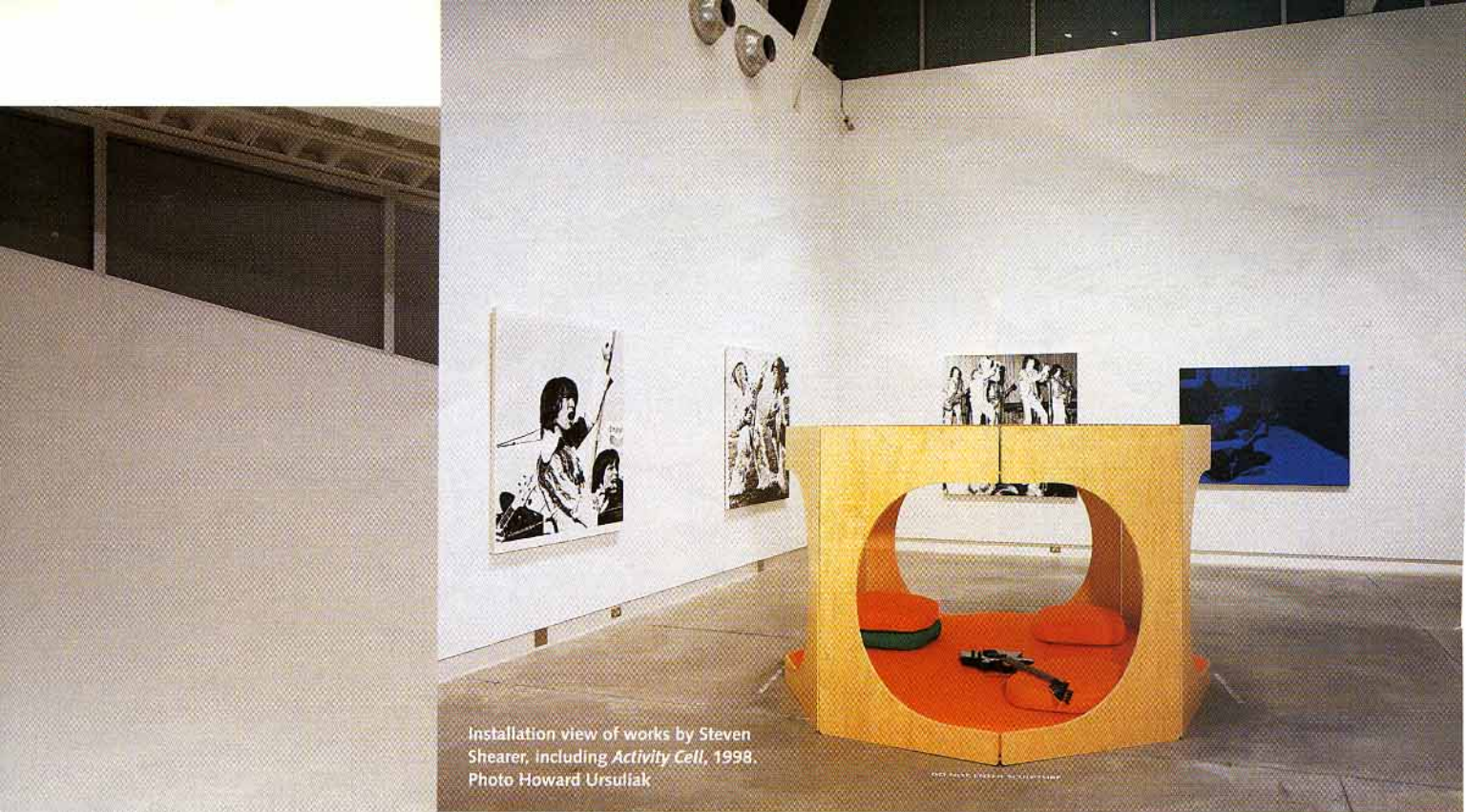
Until, that is, the contradictory nature of Modernism itself became institutionalized within the frameworks of art-historical research, art-school teaching and curatorial practice. Until, also, the point has been reached when each and every characteristic of Modernism has become so familiar its very operation reveals at every instance an even bigger contradiction, that of the complete integration of modernist iconoclasm within the iconographism of the art-institutional system.

Pop Art understood well this predicament of art by ironizing Modernism's ideals with Modernism's fate, which it saw as inevitably tied to the logic of industry and the museums. Conceptualism attempted to disengage art from institutional dependency by problematizing the status of the art





Installation view of
"6 New Vancouver Modern."
Left, Kelly Wood
Garbage Bag 1998;
right, Geoffrey Farmer
Wormhole, 1997.
Courtesy Morris and
Helen Belkin Art Gallery.
Photo Howard Ursuliak



Installation view of works by Steven Shearer, including *Activity Cell*, 1998.
Photo Howard Ursuliak



Installation view of "6 New Vancouver Modern."
Left, works by Myfanwy MacLeod;
right, Ron Terada.
Courtesy Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery.
Photo Howard Ursuliak

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object. In so doing, it hoped to propel art in a new and socially relevant direction free from the contamination of both the marketplace and traditional definitions. While never entirely succeeding in its goals, Conceptualism did radically expand the Duchampian paradigm of questioning all modes of aesthetic experience and production.

As a result, what has often been referred to as the crisis in art became fundamentally attached to yet another contradiction, one in which further dialectical synthesis may prove impossible and in which the institutionalization of art is sealed in advance, no matter the radicality of the aesthetic experience. From today's vantage point, every succeeding exhibition of Conceptualist Art resounds ever more loudly with the smug echo of Pop-Art irony.

The contracted lessons of Pop Art and Conceptualism very much informs "6 New Vancouver Modern," an exhibition at the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery, of works by Geoffrey Farmer, Myfanwy MacLeod, Damian Moppett, Steven Shearer, Ron Terada and Kelly Wood. Put another way, the art appears Conceptual but behaves like Pop Art. Its conceptualist appearance evokes a social and political reading, but its Pop Art interiority demands that this reading be placed in quotation marks and ironized.

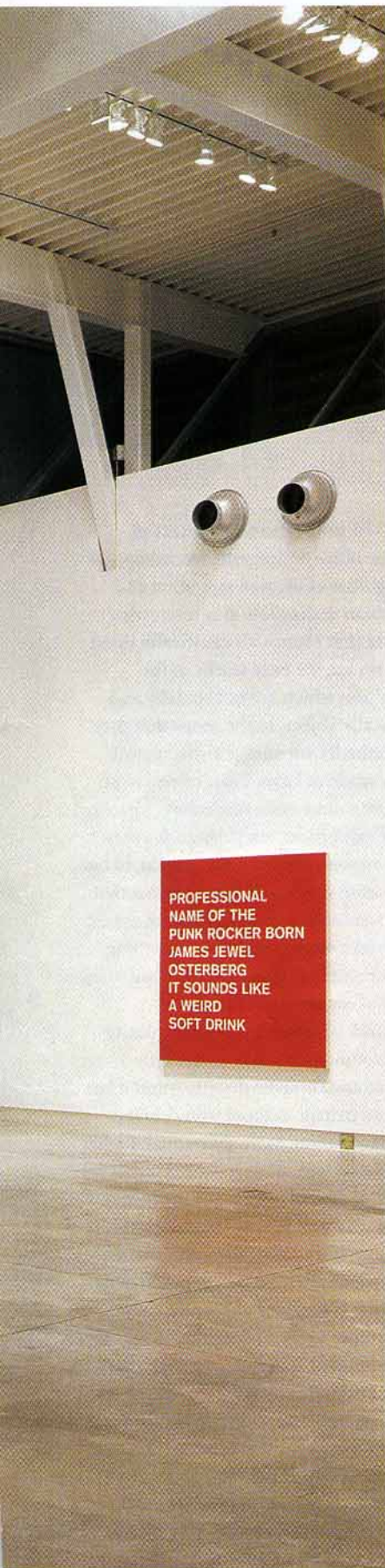
The use of quotation is a hallmark of such politically engaged artists as Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula and Hans Haacke. In their work, quotation performs a reflexive critique of the exemplary art or genre on which their work is modelled. In the case of "6 New Vancouver Modern," the model is essentially Conceptualism, the last and remaining avant-garde art movement of the nineteen-sixties to which a critical debunking of its social and political ambitions has yet to be fully exercised.

As a consequence, this exhibition frustrates our expectations by mocking any and all lingering moral and social aspirations for art. The point of the exhibition is not some directed search for real meaning in the conventional and denotative sense, despite its many signals

in such a direction. Rather, real meaning is constructed and offered more for effect. By deliberately not providing what we are inclined to demand of this art, we become frustrated in our need to have our demands addressed. More significantly, these demands are thrown back in our faces at every instance of viewing. The works seem to be saying to the viewer: "Why do you come to us with so many demands?" Or: "Why do you have such needs which are clearly sanctioned by traditional expectations?"

This refusal to provide its audience with any intelligent converse and to reply largely in blank non sequiturs does not mean the works are unintelligent. True, the works are morally pathetic, but this attitude is not limited to these artists; it concords with the sensibilities of many of the most interesting new artists working in America and Britain. The inadequacy of, or loss of, faith in traditional responses is also manifest in the reception of so-called Abject Art and Brit Pack Art. In stretching the Duchampian paradigm to its limits, this new generation of artists has cited as a problem the lack of any criterion for making artistic judgments which is not already preconceived as a guideline.

This brings us to another question. Past a certain point, how proper is it to discuss exemplary models of art as critically effective at all? Thus, quotation is everywhere in this exhibition and not necessarily as homage. Ron Terada's text paintings recall the text paintings of Edward Ruscha, but they lack the older artist's acerbic wit and morally agitational intentions. In lieu of *Those of us who have double parked* by Ruscha, for example, Terada paints answers from the "Jeopardy" game show. What Terada offers, quite literally, are trivial answers which can only be responded to in the form of questions. Terada's conversion of the format of a hugely popular television show into an inquiry of the philosophical framework of art is a recurrent theme in this exhibition. Of course, this was also a theme of Conceptualism, but unlike its antecedent, the works in this exhibition

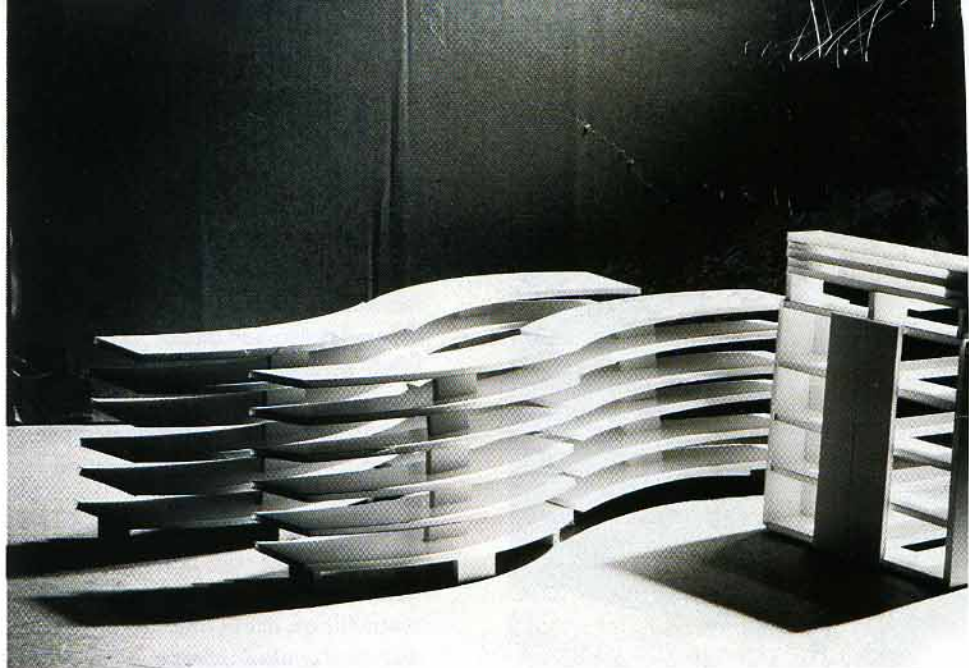


for the most part refuse to nod to a social arena beyond that of the television room or the basement workshop.

Kelly Wood's large photographs of filled garbage bags at least extend the social terrain to the property line of the home. These works have more in common with César's giant bronzes of his thumb than with any Bataille-like exegesis of excess. Theoretical references to Bataille or Deleuze are but decoys to a commentary on art's absolute loss of inspirational power or social relevance. The circulation of cynicism, so profoundly prevalent in contemporary art practice, is not only all that remains but all that remains true. It is what motivates Wood's equation of high art with garbage. What is heartening, is Wood's obstreperous commitment of so much technical and formal attention to such a cynical equation.

Artistic closure is firmly at the heart of the exhibition's narrative and exceedingly so in the case of Geoffrey Farmer, whose work was prominently featured in the exhibition space. His video installation, *Wormhole*, was festooned with coloured lights and scaffolding, props that can function as ably on a movie set or in a discotheque. Quotation is activated once again by the apparent parodying of such science-fiction films as *The Thing* (the original version) or *2001: A Space Odyssey* and is but a deflection from a deeper exposition of the video and installation works of Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham. *Wormhole* unfolds in an empty, after-hours Belkin Art Gallery much as isolation and the disorientation of time were key themes of Nauman's *Green Light Corridor* or Graham's *Video Time Delay* installations. Above all, the socially indulgent juvenilia of nineteen-sixties Conceptualists has been counterpointed by Farmer's fully realized, yet exiguous, brand of self-indulgent infantilism.

Myfanwy MacLeod's *Propaganda for War* recalls Marcel Duchamp's seminal Readymade work, *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, but the linguistic and experiential witticism of Duchamp's work is replaced by a severe bonk to the head, à la Saturday-morning cartoon. In contrast to Duchamp's snow shovel, MacLeod's shovel is as damaged as the head it hit. Also, that there continues to be a fierce



debate about Duchamp, a war of words if you will, is not lost on MacLeod.

What is at once interesting and disturbing is the glibness of her suggestion of artistic closure on the very person most responsible for thrusting art into its present predicament. Glibness is evident not only as a reflection of historical regard but in the insistent stylization and the technical sure-handedness of the works on view. In part, this is a consequence of the proliferation of the art school, of which every artist in this exhibition is an alumnus, and from which learning about art has become an increasingly glib process.

Steven Shearer's silk-screened paintings quote Andy Warhol's blending of social critique to ironic form, but are realized without tolerance for the imperfections and screen printing alignment faults that gave Warhol's paintings such an air of technical indifference. Moreover, the iconic resonance of an Elvis Presley or Liz Taylor is displaced in favour of minor and largely forgotten teen music idols of the nineteen-seventies. Shearer's paintings articulate two somewhat incongruent points. First, they are fully realized works of art, technically perfect. Second, they are profoundly unambitious in comparison to the exemplary models they quote.

Monumentalism and the cult of the hero, as embodied by the architect in Ayn Rand's novel *The Fountainhead* and by nineteen-fifties and sixties *Life* feature stories of the genius-builder, comprise the subject of Damian Moppett's photographs. The architectural models,

depicted in the modest context of a home office or domestic workshop, are ambiguities of utopian aspiration and dystopian realization. It is interesting to note that Moppett's caustically titled pictures are the only works in the exhibition which are not socially and politically abject, in the sense that they unabashedly encourage a speculation of the world at large. Their retention of a utopian dimension made them seem lost in the exhibition, but perhaps for the right reasons. Moppett also presented two cartoonish science-fiction dioramas that truly were abject. The inclusion of these two works reveals, perhaps, something of the nature of the curatorial requirement made of each artist in this show.

A lack of interpretative complexity and profundity is often an attribute of farce and comedic theatre—and it has been an irritant to those who demand of art something more substantial. Rather than moral and social substance, what we are offered in this exhibition are highly effective artistic vehicles from historically knowing and technically savvy artists. The lack of intrinsic and demonstrable meaning is really of only secondary importance to the unflinching technical precision that went into the making of the art; indeed, it is what gives the art its surreptitious meaning. What we see in "6 New Vancouver Modern" may irritate viewers to no end but that, undoubtedly, is part of the point. In today's world, beauty, emotional appeal and utopian desire are ideals that harm. ■