

EXPONENTIAL FUTURE

The title for this exhibition is meant to invoke the dizzying rush to contradictory futures rehearsed daily in the mass media that floods our imaginations. Climate change, technological change, and demographic change augur a catastrophic future and apocalyptic utopia in repeated modulating chords. Yet images also tug us into the past, towards a primitive condition of order, familial loyalty, ecstatic belief, and a thrall to totalitarian sublimines. One image, dominated by the metaphor of melting and warming, predicts a future inundation. A paranoid-utopian and magical idea of technology superseding biology, of the future condition of immortality without life, animates another image cluster. But the energy to imagine new social forms seems at a low ebb. In the mass media, the future—whether an ecological catastrophe or a technological transcendence of biology—is always imagined as our social primitive, our barbarism. Thus, the future is always also turned to the other. It is a refraction of ourselves. Infinite regress and exponential future mirror one another. The more vividly and luridly we imagine the future running away from us, the more vividly the past is itself rearranged. This is not a completely new condition, but an accelerated one that already has its own past. We live amongst the ruins of imagined futures from the recent past.

Perhaps I have done little more than describe the condition of modernity itself, in accord with an account like Marshall Berman's *All That is Solid Melts into Air*.¹ Writing in the late 1970s, Berman argues that the maelstrom of change that came with the Industrial Revolution and capitalism's access to global markets and means of production has not abated due to a critical turn to a chimera (in his view) called the postmodern, but rather accelerates every year. He contends that the

past of modernity, which is not only the entrenchment of capitalism into every fissure of experience, but also the history of resistance to capitalism, needs to be revisited, especially in terms of "the dynamic and dialectical modernism" of the nineteenth century (Karl Marx).² But I am getting ahead of myself.

Exponential Future uses the notion of imagined futures as a narrative and thematic device, a device which helped the curators choose and place the work and which opens up the larger question of the relationship between works of art and historical consciousness in a time of general amnesia. As an exhibition of Vancouver artists, the project comes with some baggage: an unspoken "history" of its own. The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, in its previous incarnation as the UBC Fine Arts Gallery, held two exhibitions in the late 1960s curated by Alvin Balkind. *Beyond Regionalism* (1965) and the somewhat ironically titled *Joy and Celebration* (1967) proposed that Vancouver's artists had moved away from the regional "school" of Jack Shadbolt, Toni Onley, B.C. Binning, Gordon Smith, and others. This regional school, which produced abstractions based on West Coast climate, topography, and First Nations art, had dominated Vancouver since the end of the Second World War as the emblem of modernity. Balkind's two exhibitions were markers that put forth the alternate view that Vancouver's artists now worked in an international, urban milieu.

There have been many exhibitions featuring Vancouver artists since that attempt to take the measure of a situation that is both local and international.³ *Exponential Future* takes place in the same galleries (more or less) as *6: New Vancouver Modern* ten years ago. For some, that exhibition represented a turn away from theory or,



Exhibition brochure, *Beyond Regionalism*, UBC Fine Arts Gallery, 1965



Cover, exhibition catalogue, *6: New Vancouver Modern*, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 1998

to be more accurate, a turn away from the problematics that had been enunciated by photo-conceptualism in the writings of Ian Wallace and Jeff Wall. Ten years on, one can see how limited that view was, however prevalent it may have been at the time. Instead, *6: New Vancouver Modern* was, as the title suggested, reengaged with the problematics of modernism and modernity. Like the present exhibition, it was crisscrossed with references to popular culture, the history of modern art and technology, education theory, and science fiction.

I would not claim to be ignorant of the mythologizing powers of exhibitions like *Exponential Future*. They excite with notions of a generational shift and *zeitgeist* and, in the critical aporia of Vancouver, a vexed recital of who ought and who ought not to have been included. They are said to “launch” careers. In this regard, these local group exhibitions carry on the old function of the B.C. Annual, which saw its last exhibition in 1968, around the time of Balkind’s exhibitions. But the problem with excitable and mythological notions is their reifying power. In the end, they reduce everything to a list and the exhibition is judged on this list. So why not just issue a list? Why do an exhibition?

In *Exponential Future*, Juan A. Gaitán and I set out to make an exhibition. That is, we wanted to give our attention to individual works and projects that might be provocative when placed with other works and projects. The title came about as a response to imaginings of futurity and representations of the future of the past we were encountering. We hoped that the works chosen would relate to each in unexpected and revealing ways. But there were also other threads we pursued. The image of infinite regress in Tim Lee’s *Untitled (The Pink Panther, 2092)* (2007) surveys

both of the main gallery spaces. The prismatic, as the refractory gleam of a utopian future and past unfolding simultaneously, became an important image that we saw in works as various as Lee’s *Untitled (Light-Space Module, Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, 1928-30)* (2007), Elizabeth Zvonar’s *Pelly’s Mission 2982* (2006), Mark Soo’s *That’s That’s Alright Alright Mama Mama* (2008), and Kevin Schmidt’s *Wild Signals* (2007). As emblematic of the same co-motions, images of things that turn pervade the exhibition: a weather vane, a vinyl record, a projector, the cranes building the new Vancouver, reel-to-reel tape, the rings of the Olympic flag, a rotating growing plant. These are, in turn, disrupted by images of the commotion of present social conflict.

We saw something utopian, although guardedly so, in the echoing of images of provisional skeletal structures—the grids of scaffolding, Tinkertoy towers, a lighting rig—that serve as emblems of the powers of deconstruction rather than phallic monument making. Doubling and mirroring are “folds” that connect the works in the installation and determine their relation to each other. Paying attention to such correspondences is not the same as saying such visual quasi-homonyms produce meaning in and of themselves. What we hope is that we have made it easier for the viewer to make connections between the works and their subject matter. The issue of how things are mediated is always an issue in contemporary art. This exhibition addresses spectatorship and spectacle, positing the former as utopian possibility and setting the stage for the deconstruction of the latter. Thus, the motto of the exhibition might be an Adornian paraphrase: “We don’t understand contemporary art, contemporary art understands us.” That is to say, the question of how representations are constructed, however

urgently pursued in today's art, implicates the viewer immediately. The first work a visitor will confront, for example, is a sign announcing that a film is being made and that by entering the exhibition she allows herself to appear in the film.

The exhibition is "framed" by two works by Althea Thauberger. They are about war, peace, and social structures. *Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt* (Social Service ≠ Art Project) was made in Berlin beginning in 2006. The artist worked with a group of young men who had opted for community service rather than military service (otherwise universal and compulsory in Germany) as conscientious objectors. Thus, despite the not equals sign in the participant conceived title, the creation of an artwork is substituted for community service, which is the substitute for military service. Thauberger worked with the men for weeks so that they could collectively author and enact the piece. On a scaffold erected in the chapel of the Künstlerhaus Bethanien—the Berlin artists' residency housed in a nineteenth century Gothic hospital—the young conscripts enact a series of moving tableaux without speaking. The situation is literally about the one they are in: "The protagonists find themselves together in an unfamiliar environment."⁴ But the film easily slides between the literal and the archetypal. In acting out their own situation, the protagonists act out the modernist myth of the origin of society. They deploy the gestures of Renaissance painting and the movements of modern dance. The cinematic treatment and rich chiaroscuro evoke Caravaggio. If the work reflects the way young people who choose not to serve in uniform imagine society, it also reflects an undercurrent of fascination with violence and power as sublime. A scaffold is used as a sound instrument and its clamour speaks of the continual



disorder that their imagination of order confronts, first in themselves, but then—disturbingly, considering the times in which we live—as other, as external threat.

Althea Thauberger, *Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt*, 2006

Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt is located at one end of the exhibition. At the other end, in a library building, we installed a new work by Thauberger, *The Art of Seeing Without Being Seen* (2007-08). As with *Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt*, Thauberger worked with a group of men who devise their own representation of themselves. These soldiers are members of the British Columbia Regiment: Duke of Connaught's Own Brigade at a training area near Chilliwack rehearsing maneuvers as



Left to right: Alex Morrison, *Giving the Story a Treatment (Battle in Seattle)*, 2007; Alex Morrison, *Friday, March 9th*, 2007, 2008; Elizabeth Zvonar, *Sign of the Times*, 2008

if in an Afghan village. Unlike the men in *Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt*, these men have volunteered for military service. They pose for the camera. Some of them choose to smile, as one might automatically smile for the camera, while others choose to “perform” the role of soldier. These individual decisions give the composition a sense of unease and awkwardness that is enhanced by the formality of the overall composition and the exacting perfection of the photograph itself. But it is the scale and location of the photograph that set up a highly charged atmosphere. The camera’s point of view is, after all, the point of view of the Afghan villager as well as our own. And the location in the

library is not as disinterested as the gallery space. The library is full of students who are roughly the same age as the young soldiers. It is as if the library has become the Afghan village being “occupied” or “secured” by the Canadian army, and the viewer—most likely a student—must decide, however subliminally, if they are “guilty” or “innocent” as they surrender.

At the centre of the exhibition we placed Alex Morrison’s *Contract with the People* (2007), a *trompe l’oeil* sign announcing the filming of the fictional *Battle in Vancouver* about some future riot and some subsequent future movie treatment of that riot. The sign commandeers the entire exhibition as a site for this film and asks gallerygoers to cede their rights of representation should they appear in the film. The sign is a pendant to an earlier work, taking us into the first gallery of the exhibit.

Morrison works as a downtown courier. When he came across a film shoot for a production about the protests and police actions surrounding the 1999 World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, he quickly purchased a disposable camera and shot a roll of the location set before being told to stop. For Vancouverites, the city standing in for another is part of the local mythology. The photographs in *Giving the Story a Treatment (Battle in Seattle)* (2007) clearly reveal Vancouver. What is difficult to discern, however, is who constitute the real police guarding the “set” (the “set” is a city street) and who constitute the extras dressed up as police for the movie. If, as the movie’s website proclaims, the demonstrations in Seattle were “the most incendiary political uprisings in a generation,” then the announcement of the “Battle in Vancouver” is a kind of promise of the return of an incendiary spirit.⁵

Morrison's *Friday, March 9th, 2007* (2008) hangs on the back wall of the gallery. The image has been "dislocated" as it has been enlarged and restaged. On 9 March 2007, the Native Warrior Society posted a photograph of its members in front of a large Olympic flag that had been seized from Vancouver City Hall to commemorate the anniversary of the death of Harriet Nahanee, whose picture they hold above the flag of the Mohawk Warrior Society (Oka). Nahanee, an elder and long-time environmental activist, had been arrested and jailed in March 2006 for obstructing the controversial expansion of the Sea-to-Sky Highway connecting Vancouver to Whistler. The purpose of the expansion is to accommodate the 2010 Olympics. Unwell at the time, Nahanee died shortly after her incarceration. Activists hold the police responsible for her death, charging that she did not receive proper care in prison where her health deteriorated.

The piece might be about "nature" versus "the spectacle," as this is what the struggle being represented is about. But by monumentalizing the image, turning it into "history painting," Morrison also restages the viewer and perhaps announces what the "Battle in Vancouver" will be over. The viewer might also be reminded of other images of raised clenched fists. This was the gesture of black power that galvanized the Mexico City Olympics in 1968. The social tensions in the image are overt and ultimately about First Nations land claims; they also pit "nature" against the "spectacle." One is being bulldozed to erect or access the other. By including the Mohawk Warrior flag, the gesture is itself meant to evoke the confrontation at Oka in Quebec during the summer of 1990. It also reminds one of similar images from the 1960s and 1970s, the high point of urban guerilla



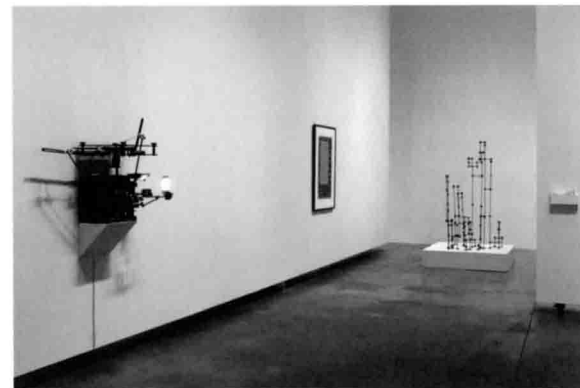
activity in the West. Or it might remind one that Vancouver was the home of the Squamish Five who promoted direct action.

Elizabeth Zvonar's work is installed in the first gallery with Morrison's. Her colossal serpentine stone hand, *Sign of the Times* (2008), amplifies the issue of gesture in gigantic form. The gesture is twofold. The raised two fingers with palm outward means "victory" or "peace." Viewed the other way, the gesture is aggressive and defiant. The hand is a fragment, a curious ruin evoking romantic meditations on antiquity or, perhaps, from a more contemporary point of view, the final scenes

Left to right: Elizabeth Zvonar, *Pelly's Mission 2982*, 2006; Elizabeth Zvonar, *Sign of the Times*, 2008; Tim Lee, *Untitled (The Pink Panther)*, 2092) (1 of 2), 2007

Left to right: Tim Lee, *Bring the Noise, Public Enemy, 1987, 2007*; Tim Lee, *Untitled (The Pink Panther, 2092) (1 of 2), 2007*

Left to right: Tim Lee, *Untitled (Light-Space Module, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1928-30, 2007)*; Corin Sworn, *The Rules; 1837, 1914, 1975 from Peas to Pegs, 2008*



of *Planet of the Apes* (1968) when Charlton Heston stumbles on the torch-bearing hand of the Statue of Liberty. *Sign of the Times* functions as augur, admonition, and omen. The evocation of timelessness and expressivity is deeply ironic. The antiquity in question is only forty years ago. The expressivity is not that of Rodin, it is more the frozen monumentality of Arno Brecker. Zvonar sees the hand in relation to her montage blow-up, *Pelly's Mission 2982*, as if the hand emanates from the "spaceship" depicted in the montage. The image of a spaceship travelling through inner psychedelic space is the Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier, Montreal's 1960s concert hall turned upside down. In its transformation of a large concert hall into a ship for an inner voyage, the montage conflates three tropes of the 1960s—consciousness altering drugs, late modernist architecture for the masses, and the imagination of space travel—to suggest that we are not, perhaps, in the future that people imagined at that time.

The first gallery is surveyed by one panel of Tim Lee's diptych, *Untitled (The Pink Panther, 2092)*, a work

that the artist requested be installed in two galleries. The piece is an elaborate and somewhat "ludicrous" machine that projects the artist into the role of Inspector Clouseau in a remake of the *Pink Panther* movie to be made in 2092. Photographing in a mirror creates the effect of infinite regress. This echoes the game of identity that has been set in motion. The first *Pink Panther* movie, starring Peter Sellers, was made in 1963; the Steve Martin remake was released in 2006. Lee imagines two future remakes, forty-three years hence from 2006 (the years between 1963 and 2006) in 2049 and again in 2092, compounding a series of replaced identities: a Korean playing an American playing an Englishman playing a Frenchman. There are more games and references in these images that unfold like a telephoto lens. In the diptych, a horizontal panel in one gallery depicts the artist (holding the camera vertically) shooting towards a vertical panel in a second gallery that depicts the artist (holding the camera horizontally) frontally. He looks through his glasses, camera, and telephoto lenses for clues, seemingly within the gallery itself.



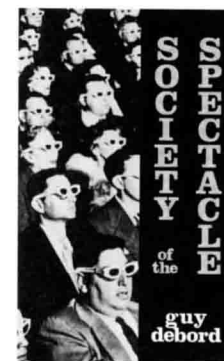
Left to right: Mark Soo, *That's That's Alright*
Alright Mama Mama, 2008; Tim Lee, *Bring*
the Noise, Public Enemy, 1987, 2007

Left to right: Corin Sworn, *Experiment or*
Demonstration, 2007; Isabelle Pauwels,
The Embellishers, 2007

The works in the second gallery, where the other panel of *Untitled (The Pink Panther, 2092)* is installed, all have to do with machines for seeing and recording and are "lessons" in the relationship between photography, technology, and historical consciousness. Lee's work has to do with historical consciousness and instability of identity, which he explores through a series of substitutions and distancing devices. His *Untitled (Light-Space Module, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, 1928-30)* is a film of a light-space module he made with his Herman Miller chair and a light. But the projector, loop device, attached mirrors, and screen are also themselves a light-space module. I imagine that Lee approaches the technological utopianism of Moholy-Nagy ("Machines have replaced the transcendental spiritualism of past eras") with irony. The strobe effect causes the spinning chair to appear to pause and then spin in reverse. This work faces an Alexander Rodchenko knock-off, *Bring the Noise, Public Enemy*, 1987 (2007), which redoes the Russian Constructivist's compositions using a Public Enemy vinyl LP record. Rodchenko's descending and unfolding

circles were emblems of revolution, the Copernican cosmos gone Communist. The black vinyl becomes emblematic of African-American identity, and the forceful intransigence of Public Enemy crystallizes as a constructive program for revolution.

The unfolding motion of doubling and mirroring continues in Mark Soo's large "fold-out" 3-D diptych. *That's That's Alright Alright Mama Mama* depicts two closely related views of a "reconstruction" of Sun Studios in Memphis where Elvis Presley recorded *That's All Right (Mama)* in 1954. The reel-to-reel tape machine echoes the turning chair and Rodchenko circles within circles in Lee's pieces. In this gallery of lenses and apparatuses, the viewer is invited to wear the cyan and magenta glasses that give Soo's diptych its unsteady three-dimensionality. Historically, the fad for 3-D movies is roughly coeval with the birth of rock and roll. What leaps to mind is J. R. Eyerman's 1957 photograph of 3-D movie spectatorship that was published on the cover of the English edition of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1970. Debord critiqued



Book cover, Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1970



Left to right: Corin Sworn, *Working with Fire*, 2007; *The Grounds*, 2007; *It Is Not The Belief That Is In Question But Its Efficacy*, 2007; *The Rules*, 2007; 1837, 1914, 1975 from *Peas to Pegs*, 2008

the effects of spectacle in the commodification of everyday life. The recording studio (empty in Soo's photograph) is part of the same instrumentality as the 3-D cinema in the society of the spectacle. But there is a dialectic here, mediated by the prismatic implications of the cyan and magenta halos that facilitate the 3-D effect and the doubling of the point of view. The artist likes to invert the usual critical reading of the phenomenon of Presley and the birth of rock and roll as the white appropriation of black music into a more complex reading of racial, cultural and identity meeting points. Whereas Lee's work is often about a deferral of identity—even though the artist is often his

own model—Soo's piece is about the staging of new identities and cultural expressions through mixing.

This gallery opens onto three other works or groupings. Isabelle Pauwels' video is installed in a room that might be roughly the scale of the sound studio in Soo's pictures. *The Embellishers* (2007) is set in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, Canada's most abject urban neighbourhood. Scripted vignettes featuring the artist and her twin sister are interwoven with footage of the 2007 demolition of the old Woodward's buildings (empty since the collapse of the Woodward's Department Store in 1993). The twins act out grim, parodic exchanges based on the street life of the area. The artist's sister plays an out-of-work actress who has come to loathe the denizens of the Downtown Eastside.

The Embellishers isn't a kind piece. It flirts with libertarian cynicism (as in the "skit" where economic exchange fundamentals are being taught to a "crackhead" selling lighters), mocks the deranged, and excoriates those who profess to care. Sometimes the sisters wear monkey masks—relating to the old "see no evil" cartoon monkeys of the British Columbia Censor. Outside the windows we see the cranes erecting the new condo tower on the old Woodward's site. Inside, the sisters pass a microphone back and forth between them. The twins mirror one another, thus interlocutor and interlocutee are one. The video frequently places the viewer in one of these positions. The video can be seen to engage the dynamism of capitalist progress at its core. The elaborate structure of the piece, with its mirroring and repetitions, speaks of the co-dependency of the urban poor and urban development.

Corin Sworn's Tinkertoy towers echo the scaffolding of Thauberger's *Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt* and the lighting rig in Kevin Schmidt's *Wild Signals*. These towers represent a child's mastery of what takes a more banal and engineered form in the cranes we see in Pauwels' *The Embellishers. 1837, 1914, 1975 from Peas to Pegs* (2008) draws us into a gallery of drawings (the three dates indicate the circa 1837 origin of the "peas and pegs" toys said to be the inspiration for Tinkertoys, which first appeared on the market in 1914, and 1975 as the date of the source material for her Summerhill works). Sworn's drawings are based on photographs in a book about the famous British alternative free school, Summerhill. Founded by A. S. Neill in 1921, Summerhill empowered its students to set their own course. In the 1960s, it became a model for student-run alternative schools like Vancouver's "Knowplace." Sworn shows the students at play along with the things they make: a weather vane, a star map, a mobile. Her drawings are not faithful renditions of photographs. Instead, she imparts an otherworldly and hallucinatory detailing that adds a psychedelic layer to the pictures. The children are shown playing, building, and organizing their social order.

For *Exponential Future*, we converted a workspace into a projection room for Schmidt's *Wild Signals*. Hidden near the entrance to this room is a ground level flat screen showing Soo's *Sweet Leaf* (2008), a time-lapse film featuring a growing marijuana plant. Unfurling and unfolding with surprising expressiveness, the plant turns slowly, continuing the theme of things that turn, and makes reference to the once revolutionary hopes for consciousness altering drugs. Topically, this work appears at the time that Marc Emery, "cannabis and libertarian activist" and leader of the British Columbia



Marijuana Party, is about to be extradited to the United States to serve time for a crime for which he would not be charged in Canada. Thus, this image has a current political context it might not otherwise have had.

Kevin Schmidt, *Wild Signals*, 2007

Schmidt, who often works in natural settings, made *Wild Signals* in the Yukon where he spent several months working on this piece. He set up a rock show lighting rig and fog machine and "performed" it at dawn on a frozen lake backed by mountains. There is "no one" on the stage. Artificial fog foregrounds real mist and the light show foregrounds a whitening northern dawn. A prismatic display of colour is a



Althea Thauberger, *The Art of Seeing Without Being Seen*, 2007-08. Main floor of the Walter C. Koerner Library, UBC

common symbol of utopian hope and social harmony. But a sense of absence and anticipation is made all the more urgent by Schmidt's "rock" composition based on the John Williams "Wild Signals" theme song for the 1977 film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Schmidt's piece works because it so deftly stages the artifice of the sublime in the sublimity of nature. It resonates because it anticipates a climax that does not come. Rather, it returns us to the silence and stillness of a frozen landscape.

Works of art do not have stable "meanings." The disclosures that they provoke are always partly

produced by the context in which they are encountered and by the experience and worldview of the viewer who tries to comprehend them. A work like *Wild Signals* could be seen, for example, in one context, as a yearning for a transcendent other that is forever absent. It could be about the emptiness of spectacle or, conversely, an exploration of the sublime using a current vernacular. It could be about the struggle for a future to come into being. Presumably, this future is different from the one our leaders see as they look toward the horizon.

I am not sure if the works in *Exponential Future* ask us to return to the "dynamic and dialectical modernism" of Marx. That would not be their role in any event. But much of the work implies a dynamic, deconstructive, and even utopian view of things. Every work in the exhibition is representational and much of it is figurative or stages a figurative absence. The figure is always the bearer of the possibility for action. The work invites us to rethink art history, as well as to think about how the "figure" is performed, acted, and acted upon. It is the dynamic of this doubleness or fold that portends energy, action, and change.

Notes

1. Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).
2. *Ibid.*, 35.
3. Much has been written about these exhibitions. Surely the largest of such projects was *Vancouver Art and Artists: 1931-1983*, a survey that opened the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1983 amidst much controversy.
4. From Thauberger's *Zivildienst ≠ Kunstprojekt*, intertitle 1.
5. See *Battle in Seattle*, "Synopsis," www.battleinseattlemovie.com/synopsis.html (25 January 2008).