

## Cat Fries

Walking down SoGr – South Granville – after viewing the summer exhibit at Catriona Jeffries, I saw this guy in a rabbit suit in the passenger seat of a *Volkswagen Rabbit* – the rabbit suit head on his lap. It was all too perfect, the conceptual play of name and simulacra, the decapitation ... one of those situations where you keep seeing stuff that you *think* reminds you of the art you just saw but really it's the art, in your head now, making you see, creating what you're seeing. A couple things are going on here: the semiotic promise of the show's theme, signalled by its title, *Signage*; and the way the art's premise of the found or the appropriated works.

*Identity is a sign: Ron Terada shows us Vancouver's identity, contingent on the mythology – as well as the visual-materiality – of the sign. Welcome to the defloration! – also in the rare meaning of "the culling or excerpting of the flowers or finest parts of a book" (O.E.D.) "What a rip-off."*

Take the hoary concept of appropriation. AND here, after dispensing of art-historical trajectories/surveys of the found, the ready-made, appropriation as 80s art practice or 90s identity politics, how about going at it the other way around, i.e., starting with the objects themselves, or what objects undergo as they become art. For there's something happy-sad about what happens to an object intended for the consumer world when it's suddenly swerved into the gallery. Germaine Koh's signs, for instance: designed to be used, to end up dirty tacked to a fencepost or discarded, edged with yellowing Scotch tape, thumbtacked to a dead-end alley or slid into a window. Or, even more icky: the signs that are never sun-bleached, that are pristine twenty years later. My grandparents used to have a gilt-plastic sign on their hi-fi console: No Smoking. These objects made to be in the world, now consigned, via the artist's talent, to the ghetto of the gallery. That's the sad part. But the happy part is not so much a utopian sense that as art these objects transcend their humble origins; rather, it is how as art these objects now bring forth – into a veritable Heideggerian clearing that is still somehow of the fallen world – their decommodified artness. For is the lettrist method of Koh's interventions not more of the same method that we all do with such objects, such signs, when we tape them to the car window? When the childcare worker wraps duct-tape around the wheels of a kid's car so it has more traction?

But perhaps art happens once methods begin losing their everyday: as computer-generated signs begin popping up for garage sale signs and help wanted posters, perhaps the store-bought sign itself will disappear as surely as the commercial CD or family photo album. And then there's the "Sorry" – sorry, I mean *Sorry* – in the gallery's front window – a *Sorry* that may be inclined to drive away browsers – always part of a gallery's intent, and surely as much on SoGr as in the DES – for *is the sign not sorry the gallery is open?* And what is that sorrow, if not some sign of the disingenuous – *I don't know, I just make art, it's nothing, I can't explain it.*

*The strategy of the found: it's a tad disingenuous in that you can attribute intention/design/aesthetics as origin to the object or text that's been appropriated. But that's the idea. It frees you up – delegates work, in effect – to concentrate on the unintended selection. Appropriation is the use of the found object. The apology – which links strategies – thereby establishes the ideological overdetermination of this, the opposite of "never having to say you're sorry."*

Here we bleed into the semiotics of signage: who speaks these signs, either as the manufactured objects or as art? You pick up a sign at the Canadian Tire, to speak *for you*. You don't have to say "no smoking" or "we're closed" – the sign does the work for you, or you can supplement it by pointing to it. How wonderful it is to lose one's voice.

*If you give the sign a nudge, what do you accomplish? If the sign sighs. What's the sign's age? What's the age of semiotics, is semiotics aged, is it passé, is the 1960s conceptualism of word and play, of Derrida's structure, sign, and play, is that over? Is it an OuLiPo thing, a novel without the letter "e", a Rousselian novel from billiards to Africa, from Paris to Vancouver? It's the sign's sigh, to be sure, that we are dealing with here, the sign both as the letters, and the sign as*

*meaning, and the sign as material object. And we have to keep in mind the fallacy of "the materiality of the signifier", that 1970s moment when all intellectuals thought themselves workers, when all reading was a class struggle, when realism equaled reification.*

Back to the sad: there is a tangible loss as the object becomes art – or so I seem to be implying – a loss much like the loss-as-nostalgia that permeates Alex Morrison's pictures of old skateboarding spots. But the tangle continues, for surely the photo's of D.A.R.E. and JUST SAY NO are a bit more resilient. In part because of how they vacillate between skate-snobbery [graffiti good, signage of "the man" bad] and deconstruction. For the latter: the anti-drug signs were left on a high school's grounds after a film crew had filmed there. So Hollywood north, colonial capitalism par excellence, emulates American propaganda as a way of making more propaganda. This sign can now speak for the Vic Hi. Then, the signs are turned – a question mark here, a JUST SAY YO there. The kids use American slang to resist the simulacra of American drug fascism.

Resistance to the appropriation. It would presumably be more difficult to turn JUST SAY NO into BUM RUSH THE SHOW. Too, considered the tortuous path of Ron Terada's piece. It "began" as a poster-image for the Universal Pictures exhibition, curated by Kitty Scott, and which travelled from the Melbourne Biennale to Vancouver, Mississauga and Winnipeg galleries. Then the image appeared as an *Artforum* ad for this gallery and is now part of the exhibit. Here Terada's canny use of the liminal is at work: the work is both of the show and representing it, metaphor and metonymy simultaneously.

Such a strategy evidently harkens back to the N.E.Thing Co.'s "framing" of the landscape – or the roadscape – via mock-commercial signage. And while the stained status of the present photo-documents reminds us of that ultimate "back in the day" when the photo-mat was the artists' studio, comparing Terada to N.E.Thing Co. also point to what critics have lately postulated as some difference between hegemonic Vancouver pho-co and our new generation. N.E.Thing Co.'s projects were often of the land, the landscape and city, the region or place, and perhaps have an ideological analogy with 1960s nation-building, albeit substituting *place* for *nation* [as George Bowering has argued Western Canada is characterized more by *geography* than by *history* – which is, of course, a historical argument]. And over the past ten years, we are told, the new generation has taken as its raw material the pop, camp, and low. There's a certain historical truth to this mythologizing of the new – by myth I mean it isn't permissible for criticism or art history to keep seeing the same old thing.

In the end there's a certain indeterminacy to the strategies at work in *Signage* – a hybridity, perhaps, that arouses the Stalinist in me. Ian Wallace's two paintings help here. Consider them in terms of four canonical moments in his career: *Melancholie de la rue*, *Heroes in the street*, *The University*, and the *Clayquot Project*. In all of these cases ground and figure *within* images (the urban built environment of Prairie modernism the Winnipeg art gallery and the West Coast street, the forest clearing, the academy, bullying the Volkswagen, artist, protester, clerk or student) oscillate with the play of media for our attention: silkscreen, photo, monoprint, painting. And now, in *Suze* and *Sangria Viña Real*, painted signs are restored to paintings via Wallace's practice. Photographs of a painted wall which itself signifies which is to say, an aesthetic representation of painting-as-labour, painting as commodity are then deconstructed, neutered of meaning via the overdetermination of an indeterminate multiplicity of the media. If in Arni Haraldsson's work we occasionally witness a baleful backing-off from photography as practice or aesthetic image, here, for Wallace, the always-already indeterminate image signs' letters impressionistically pixelated by the painted bricks must, it seems, be flipped through *all* media photography, painting, printing or silkscreening, for we are all now unsure as to "which way works the best".

This is the positive spin (or allegory) on hybridization and an even rosier picture was recently drawn for us by Chris Brayshaw in his article on Haraldsson whereas those of us with a Frankfurt school education must needs point out, like dissipated, disproving uncles, that hybridization as

borders", free trade, and globalization. But the way dialectics works, of course, is that in the end, the only critical methods left to us are those forever stained with the blood of economic struggle. We take what's there, and we put it to work.

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