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Anatomy of a Protest: Wendy Coburn and the mechanics of Slutwalk

In 2011, artist Coburn set out to make a video piece about a women's rights movement spurred by police insensitivity. She got more than she bargained for.

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Stage Left, Stage Right, Centre Stage: The scene at police headquarters at the end of 2011's Slutwalk, as captured in this triptych by Aviva Rubin, who was with Wendy Coburn as they started to notice inconsistencies in the protest's main players.

By: Murray Whyte Visual arts, Published on Fri Dec 05 2014

Wendy Coburn, an artist, professor and sculptor by inclination, was a verifiable newbie when it came to making video art. Her first shot at it, though, is a doozy.

At the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery at the University of Toronto, Coburn's exhibition *Anatomy of a Protest* continues to Dec. 19. In the first gallery, various images and objects culled from the inaugural 2011 Toronto Slutwalk protests fill the space: protest signs saying things like "Slut = Dignity," or photographs of a 3,000-strong crowd clustered around police headquarters, where the protest culminated and then dispersed.

More telling, perhaps, are a set of slick, stylized pictures of various objects shot with studio-crisp precision: a pair of red high tops, a toy bubble-blowing set, a slumpy pair of jeans.

They're the beginning of a story that starts to unfold, in full, in the next room, where Coburn's maiden flight into video-making is playing. On that April day in 2011, Coburn and a friend, energized by the protest's sexuality-positive message and what appeared to be a rising tide of activist empowerment following the riotous G20 protests just nine months earlier, set out with a video camera to capture some images.

A little background: Slutwalk was a direct response to an ugly police gaffe. Constable Michael Sanguinetti, speaking at a public safety forum at York University, told an audience that one way women could avoid being sexually assaulted — a persistent problem on campus — was "to avoid dressing like sluts."

The response from various groups was swift and predictably outraged. Slutwalk coalesced quickly around a perceived law enforcement priority to scrutinize the victim as much as the accused. "Because we've had enough" became the movement's official rallying cry and Slutwalk organizer Heather Jarvis, speaking to the Star, said that legally, sexual assault is not about what a woman wore or did: it is about consent.

"You should be able to be whoever you are," she said at the time. "(The) police and the justice system should be there to back us up."

Coburn, an OCAD University professor, turned up at Queen's Park that April day with an open mind. She wasn't sure what she would do with the footage once she had it — she was a sculptor, after all — but she was willing to wait and see.

The results, it's safe to say, are nothing like what she might have imagined. Her video

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unfolds, with Coburn providing the narration, in three acts: at the Legislature, where a rally kicked off the march; the march itself; and the arrival at police headquarters.

Arriving at Queen's Park, where the protest began with a rally, she was surprised to see a flamboyant pair waving fluorescent signs saying provocative things like "Slutty is as slutty does" and "I was a closet slut."

One, Diamond Darryl Kay, dressed in outsize sunglasses, leopard print leggings, a yellow polka-dot shirt and a shiny black dinner jacket, was the louder of the pair; his apparent partner, a woman calling herself Sara Noble, wore a see-through blouse, black bra and too-tight tights that failed to cover the upper part of her waist, where a lacy black thong could be seen poking through.

"They took up a lot of space," said Anna Willats, a member of the Toronto Police Accountability Coalition, which advocates for transparency of local security forces. "They were getting their faces in front of every camera they could find. They seemed different from everybody else: their signs, the way they were acting. They were not in tune with the rest of the crowd."

Coburn was about to learn how much. Tracking their progress as the crowd of 3,000 marched down College St. to Toronto Police Headquarters at Bay, Darryl and Sara appeared to be leading the way, her with the off-kilter signs, him with a child's bubble-blowing toy.

Around them, more strange characters had emerged: a man in a bicycle helmet with blue grease paint streaked on his cheeks and empty water bottles taped all over his back, a beefy average-joe type draped in a crimson boa.

Arriving at police headquarters, the motley crew climbed on top of a green minivan and started whipping up the crowd with chants, dance moves and airhorns, calling it the "big slut after-party."

Here, in Coburn's video, the penny seems to drop. On camera, she can be heard asking Sara, who has by now unlocked the van, how she managed to find such a plum parking spot in front of police headquarters while the rest of the street had been cleared of vehicles for the protest.

She asks her point blank: "Are you with the police?" Sara smiles but says nothing. Darryl, meanwhile, has disappeared. Or has he? On the video, Coburn captures a shot of a beefy guy in slumpy jeans and a T-shirt perched on the roof of the van, videotaping the crowd and then Coburn herself. She freezes the man's face onscreen and presents it next to a shot of Diamond Darryl Kay in his flamboyant pimp getup. For all the eye can see, they appear to be one and the same.

Again, the question: Are you with the police? Darryl says nothing, smiling coyly. On the video, Coburn intones: "I look out towards the crowd, questioning everything."

In the video, Coburn stops short of an open accusation, but the intimation seems clear: that Darryl and crew appear to be somehow acting to divert attention from the protest's main priority — to urge the police to adopt greater sensitivity toward victims of sexual assault — and replacing it with distractingly facile spectacle.

The Toronto Police, for its part, is keeping its distance from the suggestion that it guided the protest covertly, neither confirming nor denying it. "I would not, and will not, speak about this or any other individual event," Meaghan Gray, a police spokesperson, said in an email. However, she said, "the law allows for a variety of investigative techniques. . . . Generally speaking, their use, or not as the case may be, is dependent on issues of public safety and/or any criminal predicate that may be associated to the event."

Infiltrating activist movements, of course, is nothing new, here or elsewhere. After the G20, it was made public that undercover police had in fact covertly joined protest groups as they planned their various actions around the summit.

"It wouldn't be surprising, no," said Willats, when asked if the flamboyant figures at the 2011 Slutwalk turned out to be agents of the police. "I think among almost every activist community, it's almost accepted as a fact that the police will be present in some way, whether overtly or undercover."

Coburn's video, meanwhile, commits to a doggedly oblique stance. "I'm an artist. I'm not an investigator," she says. This is not a documentary film, but her research is deep, thorough and suggestive. Scouring social media in the protest's aftermath, Coburn found that both Darryl and Sara promoted themselves as talent scouts and actors; and that Sara, on one of three Facebook profiles connected to her, purports to be recruiting performers for an opportunity "far more exciting" than anything the film industry could provide.

Near the end, there's a key moment where Coburn takes a leap of faith: A young woman in a brown jacket is standing on the roof of the van with the cast of characters Coburn has identified.

She seems agitated, trying to keep them under control as Darryl stirs up the crowd. He points his video camera at "Jane Doe," who sued the police in 1998 and won \$220,000 in damages on a charge of negligence. She accused the police of failing to warn people in her neighbourhood about the so-called "Balcony Rapist," Paul Callow, who assaulted her in her home in 1986. ("Doe" is protected by a publication ban).

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Onscreen, Coburn freezes the woman in the brown jacket and splits the screen. Beside her, she places a clear, close-up photo of a young woman in police riot gear who looks very much like the same person.

“A set of coincidences, maybe,” Coburn says. “But it’s interesting, isn’t it?”

To whom, and how many, we’re about to find out.



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