

present numerous salient artworks. Alongside some rarely exhibited pieces like Condé and Beveridge's humorous (some would say *humourless*) interrogation of their relationship to dealer Carmen Lamanna are more familiar faces from various factions: from the McLuhan-inspired antics of General Idea to the more confrontational performances and "proletariat" punk of the CEAC, from the exciting pop-cultural *détournement* of feminist performance group The Clichettes to artists associated with the cultural and political critique of *Fuse* magazine, like Clive Robertson and Tom Sherman. While comprised primarily of photo and video works, there are also glossy magazines, vinyl recordings, self-published books and documentary footage. All of these items, of course, reflect a time when conceptual art, performance and language codes were taken as readily available forms that could be relayed into personal fictions.

Yet, in addressing this era filled with self-referentiality, fragmentation and friction, *Is Toronto Burning?* surprisingly deploys conventional display strategies. As a result, much of the work feels modest and the exhibition has the quality of archival material presented in retrospective fashion. Even with the walls painted an alternating black, red, grey and white – complementing the graphic elements of much of the work and its reproduction in print – the presentation seems overly cautious. It is a peculiar decision – or misstep – considering the vibrancy of much of the work, and there is some excellent artwork here. From Elizabeth Chitty's anxious teleperformance, *Demo Model*, and the restless works of David Buchan, to documentation of three Missing Associates performances, which are revelatory in light of a revival of interest in experimental dance and political choreography. And the list goes on.

Following Monk's 2009 reconstruction of General Idea's *The 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion* and the recent companion publication, *Glamour is Theft*, the curator has signalled, perhaps, one possibility for how these objects and images could be seen as a spirited *intervention into the present*. By fusing critical text, object and interpretation, Monk's recent curatorial work (the "Toronto" shows) circles back to his own critical writings and projects from the early 1980s, and is perhaps constitutive of the "radical remembering" that was suggested in the press release for this exhibition, a riddle of phrase never defined. Even with its minor faults, what Monk has accomplished in *Is Toronto Burning?* is to set a scene that was split at its very formation. Discord replaces assumed continuity, and the challenge of historicizing such a period is to see time in discontinuity. In doing so, material can then be recycled back into a narrative to change or contradict, an antidote to memory's lack of obligation. Only when the past is seen as anterior can we experience the breadth of audacious work that is Toronto's – and Philip Monk's – self-image reimaged.

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Why Can't Minimal Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto Sept. 2 – Oct. 19, 2014 by Dagmara Genda

It's been said that what's minimal in Minimal art is the art itself, a claim that first finds resonance in art-world arch-trickster Marcel Duchamp, whose ready-made pranks set the tone for Minimalism's particular brand of dry humour. Remembered for its cool, rational veneer, Minimalism's lighter side might be found in the context of its origins – a group of working-class artists who spent their time refuting, mocking, fighting and drinking, all the while making work that only found its critical position after the fact. A case in point is a hilarious interview between art critic Barbara Rose and Carl Andre, which reveals a turbulent history full of emotion and conflict.¹ This is not to say that Minimalism lacked intellectual backbone; indeed many of the artists were highly educated and doubled as critics or were otherwise married to them, but there is also a definite sense of irreverence that took the form of fictitious criticism, alter-egos and other art-world "jokes." Frank Stella himself admitted to being influenced by Samuel Beckett,² whose absurd humour was heightened by his theatrical minimalism, while critics like Brian O'Doherty suggested funny alternatives to describe this particular sensibility, such as "low-boredom-art" or "Avant-Garde Deadpans on the Move."³ This is why John G. Hampton's curated exhibition *Why Can't Minimal* touches a chord that is deeper than critical distancing or playful acknowledgement of art's esoteric proclivities. He embraces the humour present in the original works while positioning it within a contemporary context. Minimalism, in all its artistic forms, has been the butt of many jokes, but it has firmly wedged itself within the cultural imagination. These are works that have influenced popular culture through the aesthetic of fashion spreads and interior design, rendering them with a mixture of serious and mundane. The works in this exhibition navigate this contradiction in a curious blend of homage and satire that might be seen as a negotiation of the legacy of Modernism in relation to art production today. *Why Can't Minimal* presents a teleology gone humorously awry, although perhaps not without reason. When historic context and social influence are taken into account, there is a sense that this deadpan humour mixed with pop culture and notions of failure is, in fact, the logical development of Minimalist style.

Minimalism and Pop Art, while seemingly very different, hold much in common: both draw on everyday life as a source of material, both incorporate seriality, and both favour industrial processes used in

mass production. John Boyle-Singfield's *Untitled (Coke Zero)* (2012), a tongue-in-cheek version of Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube* (1963–65), explicitly draws on this parallel. Substituting Coke Zero for water, Boyle-Singfield presents us with the line between caloric minimalism and cultural excess. Another such example is Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins' *Big Blue* (2007), a skewed, sky blue polyhedron emerging from the wall. Its even surface stands as a monument to form that quickly spirals into absurdity with the press of a small button installed on its side. The stoic rectangular structure belts out big band music, giving it a ridiculous aura of sadness despite the upbeat jive.

While Minimalist works traditionally were sized to inhabit the space between monument and object – so as to relate to the human body – they are remembered as very detached from human touch. This original intent, along with its potential failings, becomes very explicit in John Wood and Paul Harrison's single-channel video *Six Boxes* (1997), which depicts a man interacting with various minimalist cubes in the only way one might think possible. He climbs boxes, lowers himself into them, and does whatever else one can do with a presumably blank slate. It seems John Marriott has already foreseen such tactile interaction, and his works are aptly prepared for it. Pristine plinths are covered with pigeon spikes to deter any unwelcome contact, while a glass vitrine sports rubber corner guards, a common toddler-proofing tool in many family homes, to spare the younger gallery-goer potential injury.

Jon Sasaki, known for embodying a sense of ironic earnestness, includes two pieces in this exhibition: *A Minimalist Cube Shipped with Minimal Effort and Expense* (2012) and *Slab, Base for a Future Monument* (2014). *A Minimalist Cube* is a diminutive, scuffed white box that sits on the floor with all its shipping labels still affixed. Its bumpy travels by FedEx Ground testify to the not-so-minimal effort needed to exhibit and maintain a minimal work of art. His other inclusion is a 1m x 1m x 10cm square of wet concrete unceremoniously set on a blue tarp, marked by the fingers of vandals etching their way into permanence. The concrete mixture, however, is specifically formulated to never set, leaving us with a doubly unfulfilled promise –

that of the future monument, as well as the promise of permanence. Though ironically – judging from the decidedly not monumental size of this viscid foundation – the promised memorial monument would not have been particularly memorable anyway. The sum effect of these works, perhaps more so than any others in the show, is a touching pathos that might at any moment teeter into cynicism.

Perhaps the least obviously funny works are those of Tammi Campbell, who presents two pieces in the exhibition, one of which is titled *Pre Post-Painterly (After Stella)* (2009). This work is a large-scale reconfigurable version of a Frank Stella canvas on museum board. What initially looks like masking tape is actually paint emulating the process of hard-edge abstraction – a process Stella started using in his later works. Campbell's reification of process into a final product fetishizes the aesthetic of making rather than exploring what it means to make. The result is nostalgia mitigated by irony. The artist indulges the legacy of Modernism as fetish object, while winking knowingly at viewers to signify that we're in on the joke.

Over his lifetime, Samuel Beckett made works that were increasingly minimalist in their continuous probing of the human condition and the inadequacy of language as an expressive tool. His use of absurd minimalism marked by equal doses of humour and pessimism parallels the theme of *Why Can't Minimal*. In this sense, Stella's early evocation of Beckett remains true for the artists who attempt to position themselves in an increasingly complex web of history and visual production. While humour can often be a means of trivializing events or "laughing them off," so to speak, it also acts as a means of self-reflection and palatable critique. It might seem, at first glance, that the artists are poking fun at a version of history, but they are also making fun of their own role within it. They all embody, to greater or lesser extents, Sasaki's ironic earnestness. Not driven by the urgency of the Modernist movement they reference, they navigate the human failings, frailties and multiplicities of art even while they remain inheritors of this legacy.

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- 1 Barbara Rose, "Carl Andre," *Interview Magazine*, April 2013, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/carl-andre/>
- 2 Emile de Antonio, Ed., "Interview between Emile de Antonio and Frank Stella," *GEO Magazine*, Special New York (Hamburg: Gruner + Jahr, 1981), 141.
- 3 Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 17.

LEFT:
John Boyle-Singfield,
Untitled (Coke Zero), 2012,
plexiglas, Coke Zero,
white wooden base,
72 x 72 x 72 cm.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
AND JUSTINA M. BARNIKE
GALLERY, TORONTO

RIGHT:
Installation view with
(foreground): Jon Sasaki,
*A Minimalist Cube Shipped
with Minimal Effort and
Expense*, 2012, powder-
coated steel cube with
shipping labels, 30.5 x
30.5 x 30.5 cm., collection
of the Blackwood Gallery;
and (background): Jon
Sasaki, *Slab, Base for a
Future Monument*, 2014,
non-drying concrete
ingredients, wooden
formwork, tarp,
20 cm x 1 m x 1 m.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE
JUSTINA M. BARNIKE
TORONTO

