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the arts

A new artwork at Hart House challenges police

DEC 04, 2014 | BY DAVID STOKES



Image caption: Something is happening here, but what it is ain't exactly clear. Note the odd signs, the police headquarters, and the men on the black van.

Toronto police agents are going to protests deliberately trying to sabotage them.

That's the premise of an explosive new work now on show at Hart House's Justina M. Barnicke Gallery. Wendy Coburn's *Anatomy of a Protest* is easily one of the most commanding critiques of power in the Canadian art world right now. The curators of the Barnicke deserve high praise for presenting such a bold statement.

The work takes the form of a video centring on the Toronto SlutWalk. Founded by Heather Jarvis, the SlutWalk march is now a global phenomenon originating in Toronto on April 3, 2011 when 3,000 protesters walked from Queen's Park to Toronto Police Headquarters. The stimulus was Toronto Police Constable Michael Sanguinetti's remarks, speaking at York University in the wake of a string of sexual assaults, stating "I've been told not to say this—however, women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized." The response was

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SlutWalk, a feminist and nonviolent protest against victim-blaming, survivor-shaming, and rape culture.

On the surface, the movement was an unqualified success. It garnered national and international media attention and launched a global movement that has led to three years of SlutWalks in two hundred cities worldwide. The movement did more than any other to reclaim the word slut and stand in solidarity with those victimized by sexual violence.

Wendy Coburn was at that seminal protest, who, as queer and a feminist, says she supported its sex-positive and anti-shaming message. But she also saw something else. It started innocuously enough; she noticed some protesters holding weird signs. Then a larger conspiracy came into view. Speaking in the video, Coburn notes, “Signs that on their own might merely be confusing had a very different meaning when read as a constellation. Something was happening, meant to fan the flames of controversy and confuse the public.”

The protest was being hijacked, likely by police-affiliated infiltrators, or as they are known in activist circles, ‘agent provocateurs.’ They try to blend in with the crowd and confuse its message, thus marginalizing the voices of authentic protesters. An agent provocateur’s purpose is to undermine the respectability of resistance movements, and ultimately, the rights of citizens.

Coburn is no stranger to activist politics, and no stranger to infiltration. She states in the piece how once in her youth she infiltrated a white supremacist organization. At SlutWalk, after realizing what was happening, Coburn, armed with a camera, identified and filmed a group of about ten people working in tandem to derail the SlutWalk message. They all carry signs made with badminton racket handles, and at different points in the video, some of them change clothes, and swap signs. They keep regrouping at the same black van too, parked directly across from the police station, without a ticket in a no-parking zone.

The true protesters carry signs calling for equality and dignity: “I was wearing pants and a sweater. Was it my fault too?/Stop calling us sluts and we’ll stop calling you pigs/We’re taking Slut back/Blame Rapists for Rape”

But the infiltrators’ signs are giant colour-paper boards with non-sequitur, illogical, misspelled, and offensive slogans: “Chitty Chitty Bang Slut!/Slutty is what Slutty Does!/Sluts Say Yes!/Proud SIUT.”

Authentic protesters walk with respectful solidarity; while the infiltrators are singularly animated, blaring horns during speeches, jumping all over, and trying with all their might to stay directly in front of the media’s lens. And they’re incredibly successful. Pictures of the infiltrators and their apolitical and frivolous signs become the lead images depicting “protesters” for the SlutWalk stories on CBC, CTV, the Star, the Globe, the Guardian, all the way to India’s Hindustan Times, among hundreds of other outlets. Coburn understands their method all too well, stating that, “in the eyes of the public, it’s not fact but images that fuel the spectacle.”

While her video feels as much journalism as art, there is certainly a sculptural investigation into the objects and costumes used by the infiltrators. The work also communicates with recognizable film genres. The artist edits the film in such a way to mimic Hollywood tropes, thrillers and spy movies, at once drawing the reader in through something unpretentious and accessible. There’s also excellent original music and sound design, even a soundtrack, with Buffalo Springfield’s “For What It’s Worth” used to chilling effect, and at one point the Mission Impossible theme plays, connoting both the police’s tactics of espionage and the apparent impossibility of demonstration free from political sabotage.

Anatomy of a Protest offers a murky, unnerving look into the state of contemporary grassroots activism. As Coburn confesses, the process of making the work “made me feel crazy, paranoid, and really, really angry.” The video is a sobering close up of activism in the twenty-first century. It is also a hard knock to any naive beliefs about our freedoms of speech and protest; freedoms which are supposed to be inalienable, and incorruptible.

Right from the beginning, the police were at the centre of the protest’s aims. Toronto’s main police station was where the protest ended. The police knew the route of the march from the protest permit, required for every demonstration. As the artist poignantly asks, “Who else but our security forces had a stake in deflecting attention away from police and protesters’ demands for police reforms?”

The accusations tie into the video’s damning subplot, the G20 summit, where police cars were suspiciously abandoned and set on fire, burning without any police intervention at all, the better to paint protestors as hooligans. There was likely never a day that had more undercover cops, and yet, as Coburn states, despite the hundreds of police undercover, “our streets were never more dangerous.” There were more people beaten on that day than ever before in Toronto history. They were beaten by police. The video also has dramatic denouement when Coburn yells “Are you with the police?” at the infiltrators, who disappear almost immediately, allowing Coburn to pull additional signs—“The Big Slut After Party”; “Sluts Love Vans”—off the van windows.

Toronto police chief Bill Blair stated that he hoped SlutWalk would be a learning opportunity for some of the young officers, though one may question what exactly that may mean. We may also wonder in dismay why a dozen people were employed to damage a protest of women’s empowerment, and yet police couldn’t bring themselves to go undercover even once to investigate the disappearance and murder of up to 67 women—many of them sex workers—on B.C.’s “Highway of Tears.”

If Toronto police were responsible for disrupting SlutWalk, there was nothing illegal about it. We must demand that this changes. There are no laws in Canada banning the provocateur tactics of those servants of the public, who are employed as our protectors – whose very motto is “to Serve and Protect.”

Anatomy of a Protest is on view at Hart House's Justina M. Barnicke Gallery until December 19th. Wendy Colburn was Assistant and Associate Dean at OCAD University's Faculty of Art. She teaches there in Sculpture Installation and Art and Social Change. **n**

Image: Wendy Coburn

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