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gabrielle moser projects and things

Wednesday, December 19, 2007

You Said That He Said That She Said

I went to the Hart House Reading Room on Monday night for a panel discussion about the *Rightfully Yours*, exhibition that's on at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery right now. My friend Nick recommended it because he knows the curator, **Tejpal S. Ajji**, and I thought the somewhat random list of speakers was intriguing.

I'm really glad I went. The panelists' presentations were fascinating and the discussion that took place about identity and performance afterwards has been floating around my head all week. I even harassed poor Cait about it in the cab last night on the way home from her staff Christmas party.

The night started with **Tej**, the Curator in Residence at the Barnicke, talking briefly about the theme of the exhibition and his inspiration for the show. He coined this term "the strategic self" to talk about the work in the show - sort of a performative strategy that also borrows from Gayatri Spivak and Coco Fusco's **strategic essentialism** - and also went through three historical examples of artists employing the "strategic self" in their work. The examples were surprisingly Vancouver-centric, involving

1) Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov's **campaign to have Planters' Mr. Peanut elected as mayor of Vancouver**, which Tej saw as an instance where an identity was co-created by the artists and then inserted into general culture by adopting pre-existing personae or symbols;



A compendium of ongoing projects, half-realised ideas and pretty art things that keep me going

About Me



Gabby

I'm a Toronto-based art gawker and emerging writer/curator looking to initiate cool projects, form an art nerd gang, and curate the streets.

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Current Projects

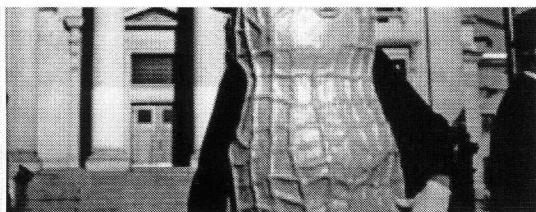
V-Tape's Curatorial Incubator, v.5 VIDEO ANIMATION - "What's Up, Doc?"
CV

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Project 4 | Karl Larsson
Project 3 | Oscar Guermouche
Project 2 | Jen Hutton
Project 1 | Fedora Romita
Shoes of Memory

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People I Like

Art Fag

Banksy

Cait McKinney

Diane Borsato

Espresso To Go - Nick Brown

Go Fug Yourself

Jeremy Bailey

Kelly Mark

Kristan Horton

Learning to Love You More

Ryan Millar goes to Rome, I mean
Brussels

Sally McKay and Lorna Mills

Simpleposie

Siobhan Smith

Vancouver Stencil Graffiti Artists

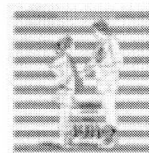
Weakhand

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Current Obsessions



Me and You and Everyone We Know



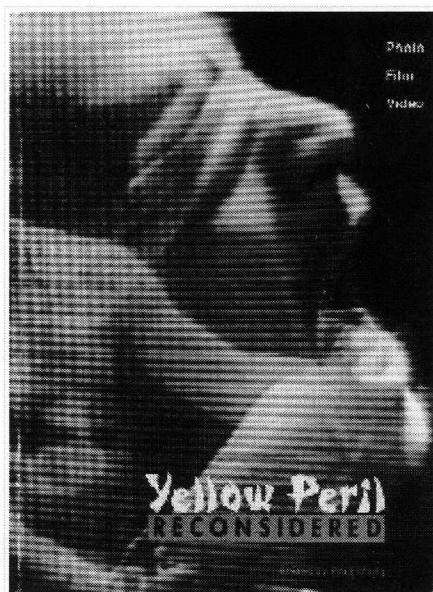
Juno by Original Soundtrack



The Artist's Joke (Documents of
Contemporary Art)

ALL CONSU

2) **Paul Wong's *Yellow Peril*** exhibition at Vancouver's Artspeak artist run centre, which Tej described as the curation of cultural essentialisms from the media and re-appropriating them;



and, in a not-so-Vancouver vein, 3) **Sacha Baron Cohen's** performances as Ali G, Bruno and Borat, where the artist creates characters that are employed as sociological research tools. In other words, what the character - the strategic self - says is not as important as the statements they elicit from their interviewees and the people they interact with.



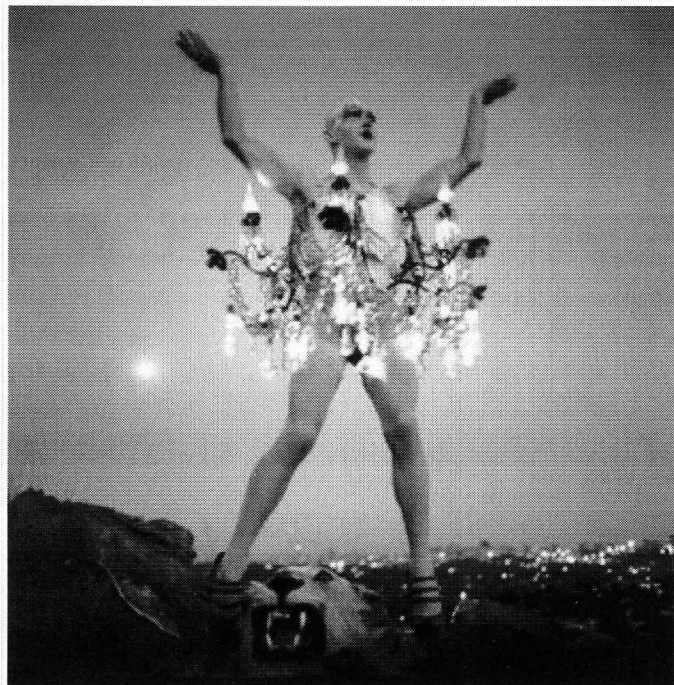


Another theme that ran through a lot of what Tej spoke about was the idea of the performativity of everyday life - the notion of role-playing in daily life and the ritual aspects of day-to-day activities. It was something a lot of the panelists kept coming back to, which I think means it's an idea that is striking a chord with people right now.

Tej was followed by **Ylber Kusari**, who is a master's student in U of T's European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies and Ethnic and Pluralism Studies (I'm so glad my program only has two words in it - could you imagine having to repeat that at cocktail parties?). Kusari talked about issues surrounding Kosovo, especially now that it is on the eve of becoming its own state, and how these issues can be seen in the visual signs of flags and political posters. I think the most interesting part of his talk was when he described some of the very real choices and difficult decisions Kosovar people now face in trying to create a civic identity that can still mesh with the beliefs of two polarized national identities. Like, how do you create a national curriculum when one group's heroes are the other side's war criminals? And how do you create a new Kosovar flag that somehow overrides all previous visual codes and is acceptable for both groups?

Next was **Jon Soske**, the editor of *RaceSci: The History of Race in Science* and a PhD candidate at U of T right now. He was by far the most engaging speaker and had me totally riveted. He talked about **Steven Cohen's** piece "Chandelier" that appears in the exhibition in which the artist built a wearable chandelier for himself that he then sported through a shantytown in Newtown, South Africa, as the shantytown was being dismantled. The performance is documented as a video, combined with a soundtrack that combines the ambient noise from the performance with excerpts from the Kaddish.





I still haven't seen the show yet, or this piece, but it figured prominently in the discussion that followed, and the still images from it are pretty incredible.

Anyways, Soske argued that Cohen's performance was a staging of 'spectacular whiteness' that provoked the consideration of white agency and dominance in post-apartheid South Africa. My favourite quote of the evening came from Soske when he argued something along the lines of "surrealism is an everyday reality for the black residents of South Africa that cannot be trumped by Dadaism." Solid gold.

You could tell that Soske really knew his history (not that the other speakers didn't, but this guy was quoting useful statistics left, right and centre and flew scriptless for his whole 15 minute presentation) and that he was also really passionate about and engaged by Cohen's work. His enthusiasm was almost infectious. He ended by pointing out that Cohen's chandelier makes a strange tinkling noise throughout the performance and how strange a sound this is since

chandeliers are normally silent and motionless. He brought this back around to the construction of national identity by saying that Cohen's performance was also about the incommensurability of cultural codes and asked "how do you represent a national identity based on shantytown dwellers and drag queens?"

After Soske was **Christopher Smith**, a doctoral candidate at York/Ryerson that did a research project on the relocation of a methadone clinic to the rapidly gentrifying **Corktown neighbourhood in Toronto**. Smith was, above all, a really great storyteller and his anecdotes about trying to conduct interviews with the clinic patients and local residents were sometimes funny and sometimes enraging. He had a really interesting take on the whole process that involved acknowledging and accepting the plural identities we hold as researchers and how enacting different aspects of this identity can be beneficial in research. He also brought up the idea of 'performing objectivity' as a researcher, which tied nicely into Tej's notion of the performative everyday.

And finally, writer and curator **Jessica Wyman** presented an open letter to Tej that addressed the rights that are attached to identities and problematized whether or not they can be relinquished, signed over to others, or taken over. She took issue with Cohen's performance, although not angrily - she admitted she liked the piece, but found its insistence on the parity between the artist and the people in the shantytown troubling. Wyman said she was concerned that Cohen had relegated the residents to being a backdrop and audience rather than active subjects. And I sort of hear her on this issue. I can see how Cohen's performance could be taken as a bit condescending and self-flagellating. Risking his personal and physical safety is admirable in some ways, but I always worry that performances like his, or like **Rebecca Belmore's "The Named and The Unnamed,"** can stray towards an exorcism of white liberal guilt rather than social critique.

Second favourite quote of the night: Wyman busted out a **RuPaul** quote. No joke. She said, in the end, she likes Cohen's piece, because it implicitly argues that we are all participating in a form of drag and costuming in everyday life and that it's just a matter of the degree to which we are conscious of this performance. And that, as RuPaul once said, "We all are born naked; the rest is drag."



Posted by Gabby at 7:20 PM

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