



# cmagazine99

International Contemporary Art  
Autumn 2008

ART DIASPORAS

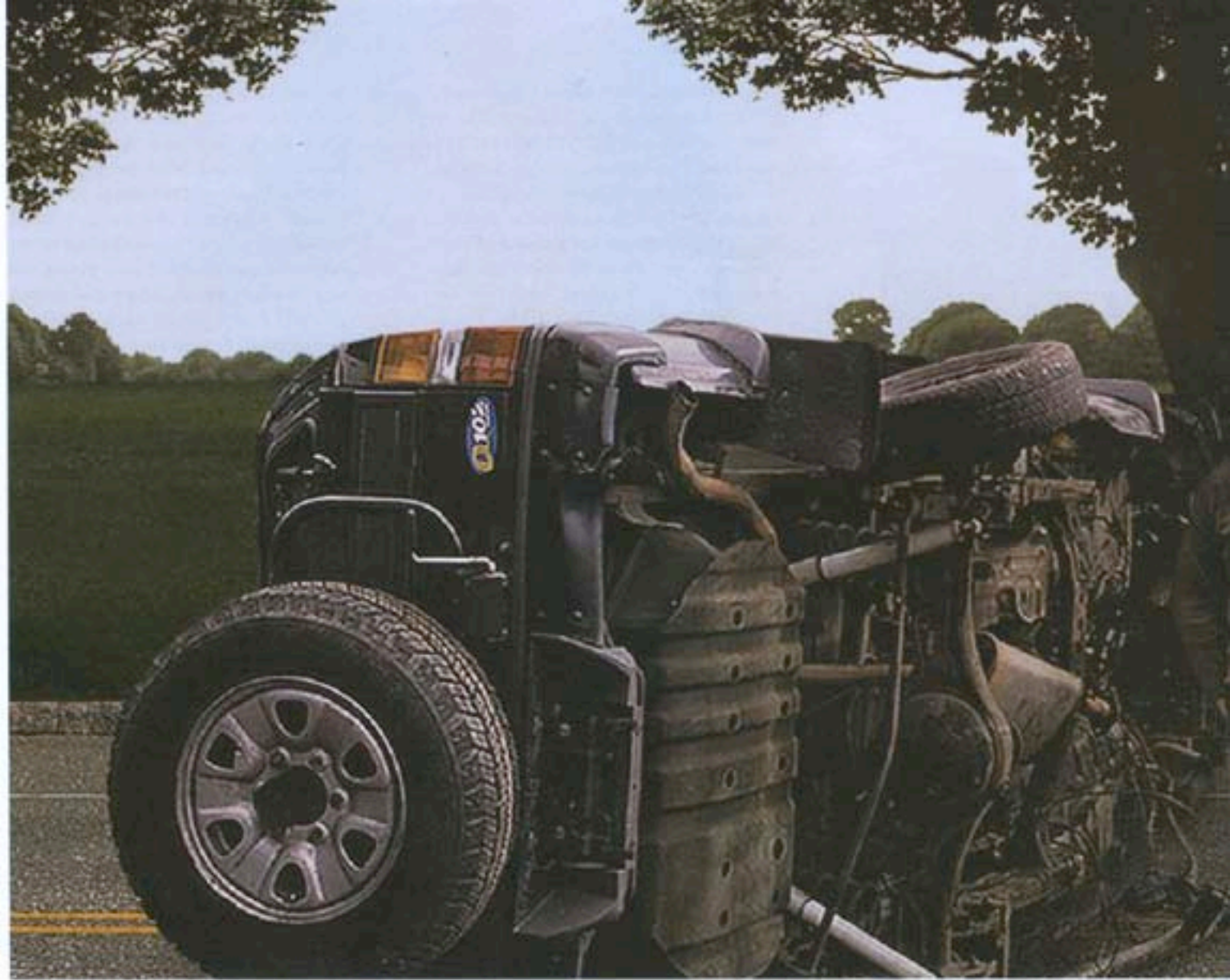
Parachute | Hou Hanru

Joyce Wieland | Lene Berg

\$7.50 CAD & USD | 5.00€



# Blackholero



## GLOBAL CANADIANS

*As Earl Miller notes, leaving the country is something of a tradition for Canadian artists*

On a climate-change-driven balmy evening last September, I attended a launch party for *C Magazine* on the patio of that Toronto club with the Canadiana name: the Beaver. Performing a quick count, I calculated that about half of the attendees didn't live in Canada permanently: they either lived in Berlin or L.A., full-time or part-time. I had just returned from Brazil; a friend at the launch was on her way there.

It didn't use to be like this—say, 20 years ago. A few artists moved to New York, usually after receiving a grant; Canada Council award recipients stayed as they do now in the Paris studio; and a few others, like Vincent Trasov and Michael Morris, who both moved to Berlin in

the early 80s, settled in other European cities.

Nevertheless, the new mobility does follow a Canadian tradition in the visual arts: leaving the country. In 1890, for instance, post-Impressionist JW Morrice moved to Europe from Montreal and after a brief sojourn for study in London, England, he relocated permanently to France, beginning with Paris, where he became the model for the Somerset Maugham character Cronshaw, the alcoholic poet in *Of Human Bondage* (1915). Morrice's increasingly frequent exhibitions received laudatory reviews—at least in Paris; Canada was less receptive.

The following decade, in 1903, David Milne made a similar move, from the decidedly non-psychedelic



Nancy Davenport,  
*Weekend Campus*, 2004. DVD  
 3 min. 50 sec.  
 Edition 1/6, 2 AP, ND70.1  
 PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Paisley, Ontario, to New York, where he studied at the Art Students' League and later participated in the famous 1913 Duchamp urinal Armory Show. Milne's career waned, and he ended up in the employ of a ski resort in Lake Placid in upstate New York before returning to Canada in 1928.

Mid-20th century, in 1952, William Ronald, in a true "hosehead" Canadian success story, won a \$1,000 hockey scholarship, allowing him to study painting with Hans Hofmann in New York. In 1955, he returned to New York, this time as a professional artist, where he was quickly picked up by the prestigious Kootz Gallery, becoming, one could say, the Wayne Gretzky of abstract expressionism. Ronald stayed in New York until 1963, when Kootz ceased exhibiting his work because the tide had turned to the less expressive style of colourfield painting.

Three decades after Ronald's prodigal return, sonic artist and musician Gordon Monahan received a DAAD scholarship (an invitational grant for foreign artists) from the German govern-

ment. The scholarship, which has a reputation for bringing international artists to Berlin who never return home, resulted in Monahan and his partner, Laura Kikauka—whose electronically animated *horror vacui* installations are composed of dense layers of found kitsch—setting up permanent, part-time residence, dividing their time between Berlin and their farm near Meaford, Ontario, a permanent work of art called the Funny Farm (see *C Magazine* 94). Janet Cardiff and her husband/collaborator, Georges Bures Miller, also came to Berlin on a DAAD scholarship, the year after their prize-winning multimedia installation *The Paradise Institute* was shown at the 2001 Venice Biennale. They decided to stay in Berlin but like Monahan and Kikauka, they divide their time between Germany and Canada, returning to British Columbia for around six months each year.

Of course, the key difference between the three pre- and two post-information age moves is that the latter aren't complete relocations. This is because of constantly increasing global travel—virtual and physical, airline and online. The information age has, for the art world, led collectively to what is now a cliché: the artist as nomad. Ease of travel for people, art and information has led to the perpetual growth of biennales and fairs, increased international interaction between gallery and museum exhibitions and further international exchange through artist residencies. Given the current prominence of art-world nomadism, the notion of diaspora, true to the original Greek meaning of "dispersion," not its later connotation of "exile," doesn't indicate a dividing line between home country and abroad, a provincial "here" and a utopic "there." Rather, it denotes an ever-shifting, definitively nomadic network.

The internationalism of artists not only begins with a relocation of professional art practice to the global stage but also through the increasingly long shopping list of residencies, scholarships and graduate programs available outside Canada. Take, for example, Julie Loquin (whose whimsical multimedia works sometimes deal directly with being a transplanted Quebecker in America) attending the Pasadena Art Centre and then staying on in Los Angeles. Shannon Bool, another Canadian, studied at the prestigious Stedelschule in Frankfurt and then moved to Berlin, where she continues to exhibit artworks that consider ornamentation in mass culture.

Berlin, especially, has an art buzz attracting Canadians (and others) despite intense gentrification. Canadians in Berlin, permanently or nomadically, include 2007 Sobey Prize winner Michel de Broin, Bruce LaBruce, Angela Bulloch



Kelly Richardson, *Exiles of the Shattered Star*, 2006, high-definition video projection/colour photograph, dimensions variable  
PHOTO: KELLY RICHARDSON

(who also resides in London), Helen Cho, Karma Clark-Davis, Hadley and Maxwell, Rodney LaTourelle, Monika Szewczyk and Jeremy Shaw.

Jennifer Allen, an art critic and expat Canadian living in Berlin, notes that the city draws people largely because of the low rent, and a climate of freedom that fosters artistic experimentation. Kikauka points to the cultural energy of the city, and how it offers an extended education. Cardiff simply praises the city's convenient location: you can fly or take a train anywhere in Europe in one or two hours. As well, Kikauka mentions practical matters, such as the ease of obtaining free materials for electro-mechanical sculptural work.

Then there's LA's developing scene. Along with Lequin, Canadian artists such as Jon Pylpchuk, Eli Langer, Euan Macdonald and Mark Verabioff reside there, a trend resulting from the growth of new galleries, relatively cheap rent and a recent decade-or-so-long tendency among LA collectors to buy local. Despite LA's rising status, New York remains a destination. However, escalating rents, lack of medical coverage and the high cost of living discourage most from taking up residence there. However, Karen Azoulay, AA Bronson, David Craven, Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg, Terence Koh, Micah Lexter and numerous other Canadians reside in New York or stay for extended periods of time. While London surpasses New York in terms of living expense, it too has attracted Canadians: David Altmeyd, Anne Low, Dallas Seitz, Ingrid Z. and Mark Lewis.

That most Canadian artists residing outside Canada settle in just a few major cities raises the question of just how much of a dispersion the Canadian diaspora truly is. Nonetheless, the cultural traffic passing through a major centre like New York allows at least for some transcendence of fixed place. So does the Internet. Much art dialogue has switched from bars, restaurants and openings to e-mails, websites and blogs. Besides, despite the cultural magnetism of established or emerging scenes, some expat Canadian artists reside elsewhere: Magdalen Celestino in Houston, Kelly Richardson in Newcastle, England and Robert Waters in Mexico City.

Dispersion, however, has a downside. Site-specific art practice, which nomadism originally helped facilitate, is under threat because of nomadism running rampant. As Miwon Kwon observes in *One Place After Another* (2000), "The site is now structured (inter)textually rather than spatially, and its model is not a map but an itinerary...a nomadic narrative..."<sup>1</sup> As a result, he continues, "The artwork is becoming more and more 'unhinged' from the actuality of the site..."<sup>2</sup> Jumping from residency to residency and from gallery to gallery, artists risk performing cursory research and exhibiting superficial knowledge of given sites.

For instance, Vanessa Beecroft can travel to Darfur—with a photographer, a studio assistant and an entire documentary film crew in tow—to produce *Still Death! Darfur Still Deaf?* for the 2007 Venice Biennale. A performance with her signature live models—in this case lithe Sudan-



Julie Lequin, *Gossip Videos* from the dvd/book *The Ice Skating Tree Opera-Director's Cuts*, 2007, published by 2nd Cannons, Los Angeles



**TOP**  
Julie Lequin, *Cor Teik*, 2008, video still (work in progress)

**BOTTOM**  
Julie Lequin, *Speech Lesson*, 2005, video still

1. Mivon Kwon, "One Place After Another," in *Space, Time, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. Erika Soderberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 46.

2. Kwon, 47.

3. *Ibid.*

ese women sprayed with faux blood—it is torture-porn through a *Vogue* filter that exhibits little understanding of the ongoing Sudan crisis.

Another problem related to artists in transience is that the liberation from living in a single location is inextricably tied to the mechanisms of global capitalism. As Kwon notes, "while site-specific art once defied commodification by insisting on immobility, it now seems to espouse fluid mobility and nomadism for the same purpose. But curiously, the nomadic principle also defines capital and power in our times."<sup>1</sup>

Where nomadic art and money most visibly merge is, of course, the art market. Consider the consistently growing commercial spectacles of art fairs such as Miami-Basel that could be held anywhere there is a market, as the hyphenated, dual-city name implies.

What keeps the commercial art market in fixed places, however, is a solid wealth base. While commercial success is a struggle anywhere, New York and London, as well as Los

Angeles and Berlin, offer more opportunities than exist in Canada. Consider Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg's comments: "because of the number of commercial galleries and private collectors in the US, there are just more 'interested' parties looking at art" than in Canada. Commercial galleries often discover artists based on a reputation they have gained through networking, and artists benefit from living in the same city as their dealers. Would David Altmejd, for instance, have been picked up by Andrea Rosen (herself a Canadian) had he stayed in Montréal, and would he have subsequently represented Canada at the 2007 Venice Biennale? Julie Lequin observes that in Los Angeles, while things are still difficult financially for an emerging artist, a real hope of eventually making a good living serves as a powerful motivator. Kikauka stresses the importance of her gallerist, the DNA gallery in Berlin: along with exhibiting and selling her work, the DNA has also been able to exhibit it in numerous galleries and museums. "This is essential for my art production," she notes, as "I get commissions for permanent or travelling shows." Conversely, being a relatively low-population country lacking an established public appreciation of contemporary art, Canada's art market is small.

The question for artists who tap into globalism to make a living from their art is how to maintain a meaningful, if not critical, practice within this reactionary structure. Exemplary of a critical approach to this problem is Scottish artist Simon Starling's careful researching of place that led to the wonderfully wry *Infestation Piece (Musselled Moore)* (2007–08). Starling submerged a reproduction of a Henry Moore sculpture owned by the Art Gallery of Ontario in Lake Ontario, allowing an art work from colonial Britain that had "invaded" a Canadian gallery to be infested

by zebra mussels, another colonizer. Thus Starling effectively raises issues of colonization and the obscuring of local cultural identity relevant to global capitalism.

One tack some Canadian artists have taken that's not critical but is comparatively effective for making use of a foreign context is presenting Canadian imagery in a new locale and, consequently, drawing new meanings. Cardiff and Bures Miller's *Night Canoeing* (2004) and *Road Trip* (2004) make use of the typical Canadian scenes their titles denote, and Hanson and Sonnenberg exhibit hockey icons and images, from a zamboni sculpture to a hockey-fight video.

Canadian artists abroad have been equally successful at countering assumed national tropes. Canada is too often stereotyped as a White country, a former British colony under the cultural spell of Middle-American mass culture. Canadian artists of colour working outside Canada, therefore, experience amplified displacement because of the misidentification added to the move.

Yet misidentification provides a tremendous opportunity for righting stereotypes. Take the now celebrity-status Terence Koh, who maintains his *Asian Punkboy* website and who had a solo exhibition at the Whitney last year. Koh collaborated with Bruce LaBruce, the quintessential queer-punk nomad, to put on the exhibition *Blame Canada* at Peres Projects in Berlin in 2007, a response to a conservative American perception of Canada. To quote from their press release:

The US makes a habit of blaming Canada for a variety of nasty things: a porous border, lax immigration policies, Communist tendencies, multiculturalism, gayness, Celine Dion. So why not give them what they want: a scapegoat, a whipping boy, a lapdog, a masochist, a Judas, a boot-licker, a cocksucker, a punk. In fact, why not give them two—Terrence Koh and Bruce LaBruce—two of the biggest faggots this side of Elton John.

While projects like *Blame Canada* provide effective cultural ambassadorship, the growing number of Canadian artists outside of Canada raises fears of a brain drain. Jennifer Allen, for one, worries if Canadian artists keep moving to Berlin and elsewhere, the Canadian art community will suffer. I'm not concerned. Actually, the best thing Canada can do for its art is encourage its artists to leave—at least temporarily.

Despite providing more government funding than some countries, Canada is an expensive place to live. As Kelly Richardson explains, "the ease of living in the UK compared to Toronto has allowed me to focus on the development of my work. It would not have been remotely pos-

sible to do what I do here, living in Toronto—or possibly anywhere else in Canada."

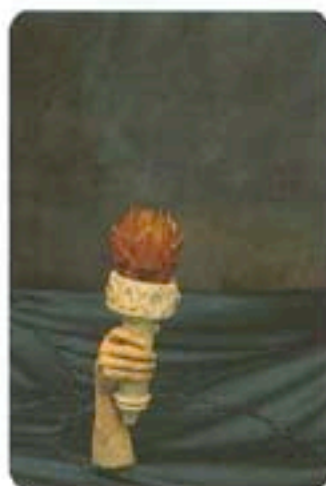
Canada continually elects culturally disinterested governments. Grants for artists do not provide a sustainable living, and when you take inflation into account their value is continually on the decrease. Yes, Canada has largely government-funded artist-run centres, but artists obviously need to be able to afford to exhibit in them. Support for building an art market and more aggressive tax incentives for philanthropic donations, among other initiatives, are needed, but it is unlikely that they will be implemented, certainly not by the Harper government. We also need cultural policies that suit this era of increased artists' mobility, for instance the funding of cultural exchanges and artists residencies in Canada.

Unsurprisingly, Canada's public shares the same daunting lack of interest in contemporary art as the government it elected. Richardson points out that in contrast, "the UK has gone to great lengths to involve the greater public in contemporary art" and "the result is that most people are in some way familiar with it." She continues, "it's been quite inspiring to be part of a culture much more actively engaged with art; this has definitely affected my decision to stay."

Combined with a failure to maintain a cultural climate "in here" is a failure to get Canadian art "out there." Despite the internationalization of the art world, Canadian numbers at the major biennales such as Venice and Sao Paulo are low; at the recent 2008 Carnegie International, the number was zero. Canadian dealers exhibiting in the major fairs such as ARCO and Miami-Basel are few (two Canadian dealers exhibited at ARCO 2008, and just one Canadian dealer will exhibit at Miami-Basel 2008). The question of who is to blame merits an essay in itself, but no finger-pointing is needed to conclude that this lack of global presence means Canada is a country that isolates its artists within a culture that fails to notice them.

Lobbying unresponsive governments to educate an unresponsive public or passively accepting an inability to maintain a full-time, internationally visible art practice is not patriotic, it is masochistic. If nothing else, a brain drain could make the public and the government aware of just how much Canada undervalues its artists. In the meantime, the Canadian diaspora actually does have as much to do with forced exile as it does with dispersion. ♦

♦ Earl Miller is an independent curator and art writer residing in Toronto.



Karen Azoulay, *Grand Monument*, 2007, archival Hi-Fi Prints, 15.24 cm x 10.16 cm each  
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ARTIST