



1986

Expo 86: A political guide for cultural producers

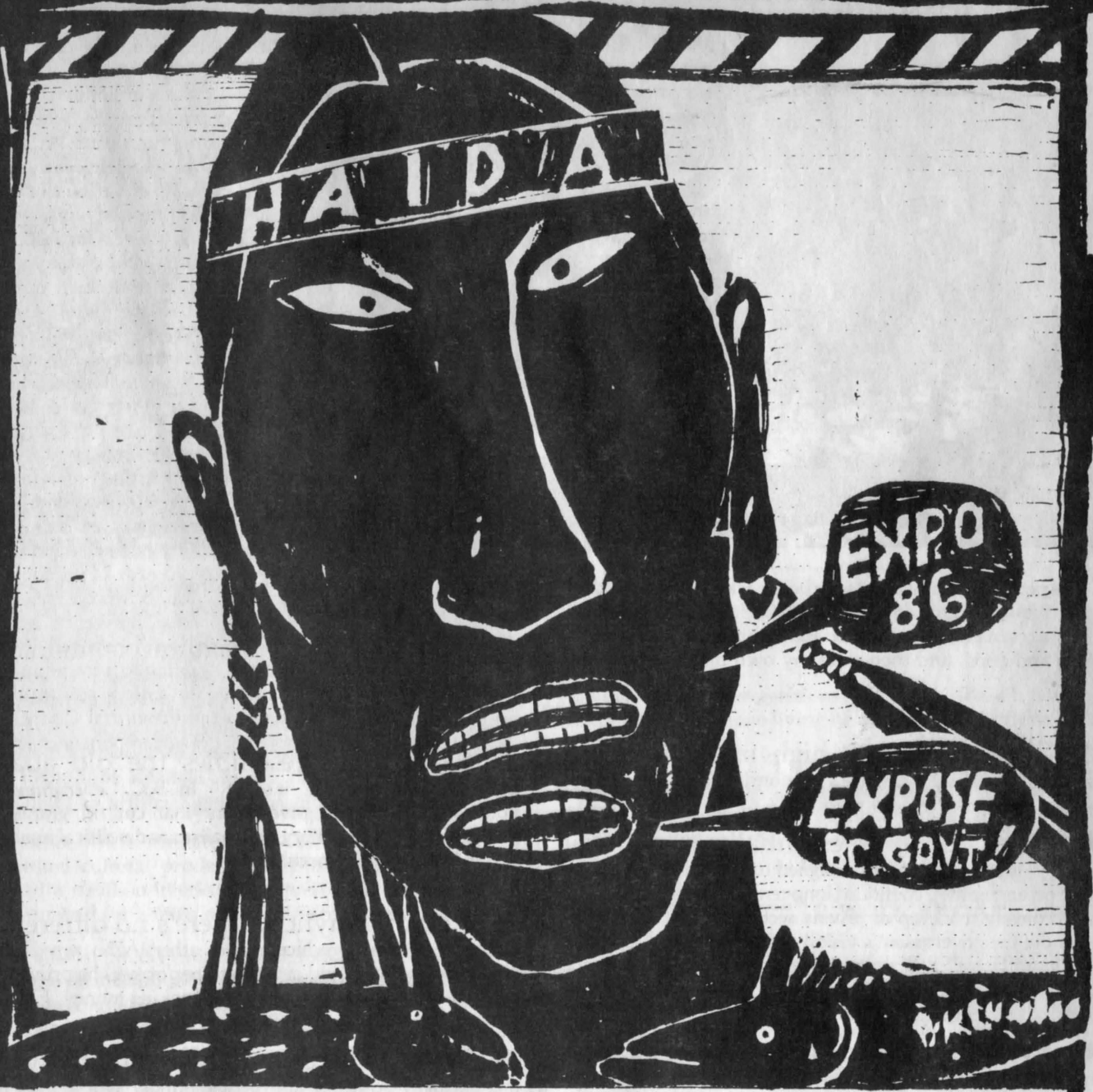
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THERE IS A DILEMMA WITHIN THE B.C. CULTURAL COMMUNITY, ONE which has its echoes in other provinces and countries. To work at EXPO '86 or not to work...

For most artists and performers in B.C., it's a non-issue: we weren't invited. The priority has been engaging "world-class" (i.e. out of province) talent. But concern about EXPO on the part of B.C. artists is more than sour grapes.

Until recently, despite early rumblings of a consolidated boycott of EXPO by the trade union leadership and by cultural producers, and the possibility of a counter-fair, there was little organization against this overwhelming event. In the absence, a few progressive cultural administrators were offered and accepted employment with the fair. This process led to divisions within the progressive community, as some began anti-EXPO organizing and others began their new jobs.

"If the provincial government runs true to form, EXPO 86's giant Christmas tree will come from Lyell Island"
 (Jacob Zilber, *Vancouver Sun*, Dec. 7, 1985)

BY SARA DIAMOND



EXPO &

A POLITICAL GUIDE FOR CULTURAL PRODUCERS

As performers and artists are being asked to make a decision about working at EXPO, it seems important to review the stakes in FUSE. In the next paragraphs I will outline the pros and cons, and then state my own bias on the issue.

● **Pro:** "There is high unemployment in all sectors of the province's economy and in the cultural sector, I desperately need work."

● **Con:** Expo is essentially a political event, not job creation; it's designed to guarantee Socred reelection and with it, continued long-term unemployment. The fair is mostly made up of private sector exhibits in order to promote the government's vision of free enterprise, "private sector initiative" and union-busting. Not all jobs are the same. Working for EXPO, especially in management positions, given its history and role is wrong.

● **Pro:** "Better me than a Social Credit appointee, if you can't stop it, join it." A variant of this is the argument that progressive EXPO employees can help to ensure that Third World and critical cultural voices are heard at the fair.

● **Con:** EXPO has consciously hired lefties in order to make certain that there is interesting "folk" culture represented. They want the cultural aspects of the fair to be inclusive. That there are no human rights in B.C. thanks to the Socreds, that the only religious pavilion despite massive protest is a fundamentalist Christian one, that there is racism in hiring policies (a Black man who applied for a job was told directly that Blacks were unrepresentative of British Columbians and that he would not be hired), that the Haida are suppressed and that South African wines are welcome on the liquor board shelves all become irrelevant as EXPO celebrates "folk" from around the world. The hard work of performers and progressive administrators could create

credibility for EXPO. Subversion from within can be an important tactic, but is it really possible?

● **Pro:** "It's not the cultural community's fault that it's an event the Socreds initiated. We are not working to re-elect the Socreds. It's art and culture we're producing, not an election campaign."

● **Con:** This resembles the old adage that "it's not political, it's art." In B.C., *everything is political*. This is the government that cut off grants to publishers of social history, journalism and political analysis and is bringing in censorship.

● **Pro:** "Anyhow, there's no difference between cultural producers and others who are EXPO employees; why should artists and performers be principled and self-sacrificing when others are making money, EXPO's the only game in town in '86."

● **Con:** There is a difference between management positions and people simply working at the fair. Management is there to make EXPO successful while individual workers are there to earn a living in a context they don't control. The energy that's going to build EXPO could have gone into a counter-event, and that's the energy of managers and of staff. Some cultural producers and organizations have chosen not to work at EXPO.

● **Pro:** "This is a world-class event; it allows cultural administrators to work with top performers and artists. Employment here if you're an artist is a major career break. My music (art) is progressive and will raise consciousness. It's an audience I could never hope to reach otherwise.

● **Con:** It's true: to refuse an EXPO contract is to refuse an important career opportunity. It requires a choice. True, you can reach audiences, but your



"The Rhinestone Meatball" as it is affectionately known — by night an artificial gem of paste and glass

presentation will be mediated by the context. Besides, EXPO has treated cultural producers shabbily. One B.C. artist designed a pavilion interior on request and then was suddenly bumped for a mass media oriented project.

● **Pro:** "Why quibble because it's provincial government money? After all the federal government is right wing and no one criticizes people for getting grants from them. And how is it different from working for the mainstream media?"

● **Con:** Deciding to work for the mainstream media, if you're critical of mass culture, usually involves deciding where you can be instrumental and effect change, as well as earn a living. It involves fighting for control over the right to speak critically of the institutions of media themselves as well as on issues. EXPO employees are not permitted to be openly critical of the event. And the big question remains of whether *in this instance* the critical voice will have any impact other than building credibility for a destructive process. On the issue of funding: artists have fought for cultural funding mechanisms where they have some control and are not *controlled*; EXPO does not work that way.

● "But the fact is that there is not an organized boycott." This argument points out the realpolitik of the issue. Those who are strongly opposed to the fair have

failed to organize a coherent response to EXPO. Some have feared that an organized boycott, if successful, would cause many British Columbians to blame the left for the economic failure of the fair and have argued that we should let the event hang itself. Others have been simply too involved in the day-to-day defensive struggle that has come to characterize life on the coast.

Which relates directly to what I think EXPO has meant to B.C. Millions of dollars have been drawn out of public services, health care, and education to make EXPO possible. B.C. residents will carry the debt for years. The jobs lost to make way for EXPO were qualitatively better (Transition Houses, child abuse teams, nurses, teachers...) than minimum wage service jobs easily done by ex-social workers, ex-teachers, etc. EXPO has been instrumental in busting union labour in the construction industry and in piloting Social Credit free trade (non-union, no protective legislation) zones in B.C.

Nonetheless, it is hard to ask people to act on principle when there is not an organized boycott. Yet there is large-scale hostility to the fair. It's seen by thousands to be a drain on the province's resources. Many B.C. residents *can't afford to go to it* and, as has been explained at length, it is a Sacred political project.

What then should cultural producers do?

I have two alternate suggestions from (1), the ideal, based on what I feel as someone living here, to (2), the bottom line:

● **1 SAY NO TO EXPO!** Explain that you don't want to help win the Social Credit Party another electoral victory in B.C. In particular, don't produce pro-EXPO hype and don't take on administrative positions and work to make the fair a "success."

● **2** If you agree to work at EXPO as a performer do the following:

a) Insist that EXPO writes into your contract that you do not have to cross picket lines. Remember: there have been endless labour disputes and there are discrimination issues that will come up in 1986, so there could well be picket lines.

b) Make a political statement about politics in B.C. and about the fair itself at your performance, in your art or in your artist's statement about your art. *It's not enough to do a benefit off-site or talk in general terms about union issues, racism or sexism.* Please use your position of power as a performer to relate these issues to the reality that we face in B.C. Speak out: about the closure of Vancouver's Transition House, for example, or the fact that non-union contractors bilked building trade workers for about one million dollars in wages on the site, about the Haida losing their land or about the fair being a prolonged election rally... If you need information on B.C., just read back issues of *FUSE!*

c) Make contact with progressive artists and performers in B.C. and with anti-EXPO groups and find out what the update is on resistance to both the government and EXPO. Lend your support.