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The price of political poker: Gambling on solidarity

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THE PRICE OF POLITICAL POKER

GAMBLING ON SOLIDARITY

A MULTI-MEDIA INSTALLATION BY VANCOUVER video artist Chris Creighton-Kelly, entitled *The Price of Poker: Gambling on Solidarity*, ran for two weeks at the Unit Pitt Gallery in Vancouver. Combining conceptual art and documentary, Creighton-Kelly employed the materials generated by the B.C. Solidarity movement, media clips and satirical commentary in order to reveal the dynamics within the province's strike wave of November, 1983.

SARA DIAMOND

THE TAPE RECORDED VOICE OF B.C. labour leader Mike Kramer, stating that the price of poker will go up on November 1st, greets the viewer entering the enclosed white space of the installation. Henceforth, there is a media bombardment which recreates the intense feelings of the weeks

leading up to and during the general strike. All of the major visible forces are present in the room: the government, trade union leadership, Solidarity activists, and media.

The communiques, motions, press and leaflets of the movement are captured in plastic museum display bags

INSTALLATION SHOT OF CREIGHTON-KELLY'S *THE PRICE OF POKER*



on one wall. The synthesized debate, represented by political buttons is enclosed on another wall. Neatly organized poker hands fill yet another. A T.V. plays a video loop of the mass media's interpretations of Solidarity events. On a facing wall are interviews with Solidarity militants, each responding to the question: "How did you feel when the strike was called off?" The unedited interviews, shot in real time, against a stark background, provide an implicit critique of television "news" replete with its array of experts (Premier Bennett, Employer's Council of B.C., the top union leadership...). A graffiti commentary by the artist surrounds all the displayed items, providing both an informative context and interpretation. The museum-like environment allows a sense of distancing and contemplation, yet its construction imposes an intensive debate between all of those mediating between the government and those affected by its budget.

Absent from the installation are the base and periphery of Solidarity, the thousands who filled the ranks of demonstrations, or leafletted in their community, many of whom had made the first conscious political commitment of their lifetime. A broader video survey could have afforded the opinions of housewives, students, rank and file public sector workers, non-striking workers, older people, etc. — all affected by the strike and the legislation. The piece is limited to those engaged in moving Solidarity in one direction or another. Even activists, who were ultimately removed from the exercise of power, did play a key role in pressing Solidarity into strike action. In that it provides an articulate critique of the movement from the inside, it is a valuable piece of work, but it might well place the less politicized viewer between positions, rather than providing a place of identification.

Creighton-Kelly structures a powerful and emotional opportunity to relive the Solidarity experience; to ponder why a union leadership, faced with a unified and growing strike wave, massive public empathy and a bluffing government, blew the winning hand. The voices and faces of Solidarity activists defy the notion that politics is a game. The demoraliz-

THE SOCREDS ARE PREPARING A 1984 BUDGET WHICH WILL MAKE JULY 7TH LOOK LIKE ICE-CREAM

B.C.
SOLIDARITY

ing impact of betrayal and defeat are unmistakable. As one viewer (a teacher) commented:

We were together. We were determined to stay out until we gained our central demand: protection for quality education. This display underlines the sadness we all experienced. We went out and gained little or nothing.

The use of an art context to unravel an historical moment exposes the feel as well as the functioning of politics. Solidarity was so vivid in B.C. that this piece has appealed to an audience beyond that of the usual gallery installation. It has received extensive media



CREIGHTON-KELLY IN ACTION AT WAB'S PICNIC AT GRACIE'S

coverage, perhaps because it comments on a self-conscious media, at a time when there is a virtual blackout on the continued efforts of Solidarity. Teachers, activists, and trade unionists (including Mike Kramer) have filed through. The attempt to understand a mass movement has been appreciated. While rooted in a specific context, there is, as one of the video subjects states, an almost universal lesson about entrenched leadership, government power, media and the explosive dynamics of power, which make this work accessible and valuable beyond the geographic boundaries of British Columbia.

—Sara Diamond

IS THERE LIFE AFTER KELOWNA?

PREPARING FOR THE NEXT ROUND

SARA DIAMOND

THE QUESTION ON MANY OF OUR MINDS today in British Columbia, is: Is there life after Kelowna? The B.C. legislature is again sitting. Human Rights and rentals legislation have been cosmetically revised, in response to pressure from Solidarity, but not yet reintroduced to the House. Public sector unions have negotiated exemptions from Bill 3 (removing seniority and bargaining rights), but the majority of legislation is now on the books. Massive cutbacks are proceeding as planned.

In February, many social services went out for tender, that is, sale to the private sector, leaving a skeletal welfare distribution structure through the Ministry of Human Resources. Local and provincial Solidarity coalitions continue to meet, generally adopting the long-term perspectives favoured by the B.C. Federation of Labour and N.D.P.: education and electoral change. In the Vancouver area, groups such as *Women Against the Budget* (still alive and well) and the *Lower Mainland Solidarity Coalition*

are centering on the defense of social services, such as *Vancouver Transition House*, about to be "privatized" or eliminated.

The Socreds are preparing a 1984 budget which will make July 7th look like ice cream. They plan major revisions to Workers' Compensation, drastic cuts to the public sector and, according to Bennett, the elimination of many social services which, he feels, were scarcely touched by the 1983 offensive. This year promises a new Labour Code, which will include limitations on picketing, give the Cabinet the right to declare any strike illegal, ease decertification, eliminate the independent Labour Relations Board and restrict construction sector unionism.

The struggle has not ended. *FUSE* readers can assist by writing a letter of protest to Premier Bennett, Legislature, Victoria, B.C. demanding the continuation of *Transition House*, other social services, human right protection, or whatever most touches your concerns.