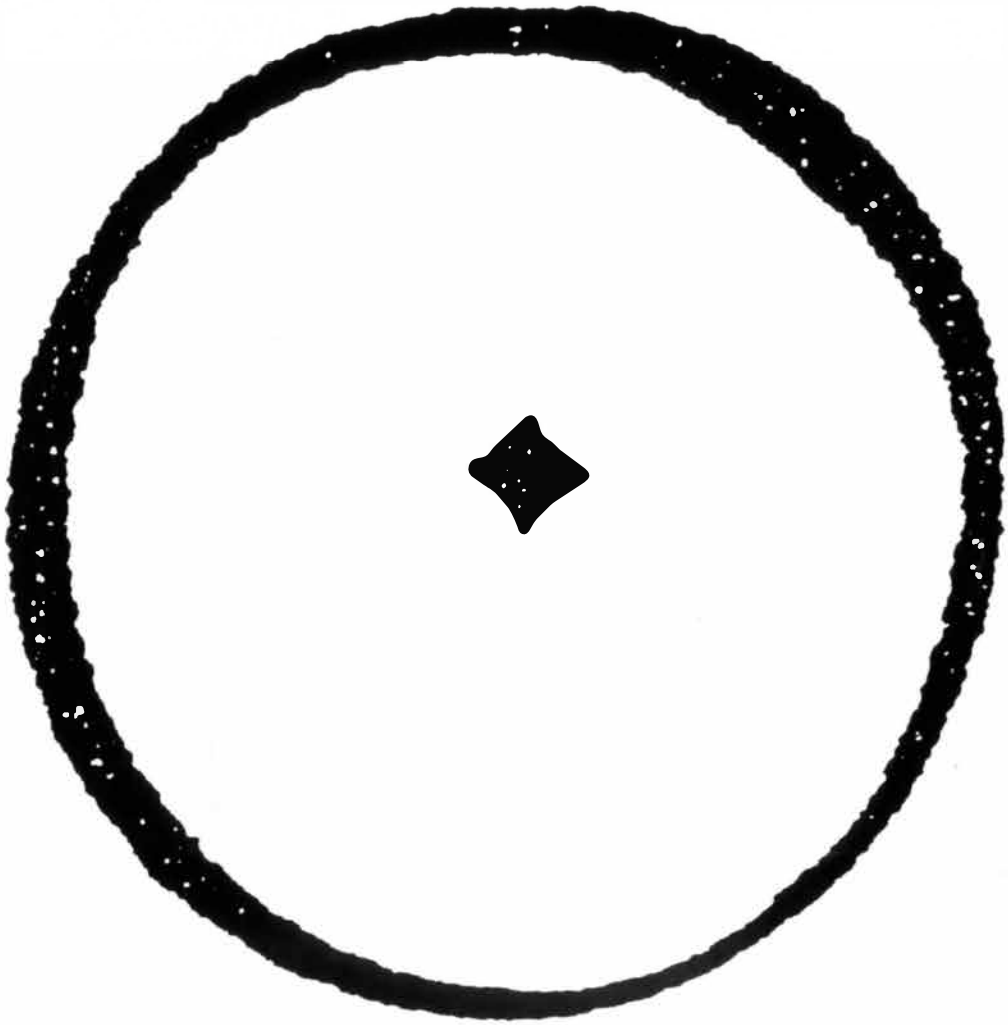
1995

Fear of symbols (Eldon Garnet's proposal for a public art project for the site of a condominium)

Garnet, Eldon

Fear of Symbols

by Eldon Garnet



One more incident in the inexplicability of life.

Yesterday, I went to court to contest a parking ticket. Why? I don't know why. I haven't bothered to fight tickets since I was a teenager. Expending an inordinate amount of energy to arrive at Toronto's Old City Hall (parking illegally), I appeared in Court H only to be told: you've been found guilty at an earlier court date … yes, there has been a clerical error and if you want you may appeal. Appeal a parking ticket! Bureaucratic line-ups my Kafka-esque future? Forget it! Who cares whether I'm innocent or guilty; just pay and be freed of the bureaucratic burden.

Is there meaning to be found in the midst of absurdities? Do I really believe that life's master allegory might be contained in the trite and inexplicable? Maybe not, but this trivial experience brought to mind frustrations and absurdities from a year ago, a time when I was taught a fundamental art lesson. I had never considered then that an entrepreneur /developer could teach an artist anything new about the fear and power of symbols.

I first met Jay Leibfeld as one of five artists invited to submit a proposal for a public art project for the site of an upscale condo that his family's firm was developing. The project was part of Toronto's 1%-for-Art program, which was set up in the mid-eighties after controversy over the Airman's Memorial on University Avenue (dubbed "Gumby Goes to Heaven"). The city required that one percent of the capital cost of this new building on Bay Street be allocated to public art. Under the terms of the program the developer couldn't merely ask an artist-friend to create a work for his building. There must be a juried competition, monitored and approved by the Toronto Public Art Commission. This process is intended to protect Toronto's citizens from the unregulated artistic taste of its developers. Few who have given the matter much thought are ready to entrust decisions about the city's cultural image to someone just because he/she has the money to build a downtown condo. (Look at some of the buildings if you wonder why.) And this particular building could certainly have raised reasonable doubts about the developer's artistic taste: your basic downtown, twenty-six storey condo – utilitarian, uninspired, slightly kitsch, late-modern/post-modern architecture.

I had no illusions that the condo was likely to be the site of a major artistic intervention. The developer would probably want a work that would embellish the building. The challenge was to propose an art piece that would comply with this desire and still possess meaning for me. But the obligations were modest: I would be paid $1500 to develop a proposal, to illustrate the proposal in a drawing and to present this to the jury.

Jay, one of the three duly appointed jury members for this competition, was to represent his own interests. The two other jury members (assigned to preserve the art interest) were Olga Korper, art dealer, and Larry Richards, architect and teacher. I wore my best black jacket and presented my drawing, smile and verbal explanations to the jury. What I proposed was a work consisting of a series of line drawings of different symbols, each symbol cast in a square bronze border. Twenty-six symbols would be inlaid along two sides of the building in the concourse walkway, on Bay and Hayter Streets. The symbols were primal – shapes to which one's primary response would be visceral rather than intellectual; their meanings were not explicit. I had derived them by researching line symbols in everything from Celtic and other mythologies to the scribbles of schizophrenic patients. They were to be arranged in an associative narrative dealing with the building's occupancy, use and location within the city. Pedestrians would walk over and around them, passing them as they entered and exited at all points in any direction, taking in the work differently depending on their own experience with the building. Only the exceptionally curious might read the entire narrative. The work was to be a simple, elegant mediation on the building and its use. Each of the three jurists asked polite, pointed questions, which I politely answered.

Some time later I was notified of the result. I had won. I was to be awarded the commission on the signing of a contract. Good: I liked my project and they liked my project.

Of all my public-art proposals this was certainly the most benign and decorative. Imagine my surprise therefore when the art consultant for the project, Karen Mills, informed me that there was a problem with the symbols. What could be wrong with these symbols?

Well, Jay thinks they might be offensive to some people.

Offensive? Excuse me, you mean someone is going to be offended by a circle with a dot in the middle?

Yes, he's afraid that someone might be offended. He's afraid sales might be hurt. And you realize sales are his most important concern. You wouldn't want to hurt his sales, would you?

But how could anyone except a lunatic be offended? Who would refuse to buy a condo in a building because of this art?

Jay had a problem once. He says a man once told him he wouldn't buy a unit in one of his buildings because in the lobby there was a design of two offset squares in a circle, which this man read as a Star of David. It wasn't a Star of David, which Jay explained, but the man continued to see what he wanted to see and refused to buy a condo. You see Jay's problem.

Sure.

Well, then, you'll have to reassure him. Prove to him there is nothing potentially offensive about your symbols.

How does one prove that a triangle within a circle isn't offensive? Do I do a survey? Are you offended by any of these symbols?

No. But I'm not Jay worried about selling condos, and it is a very difficult market. By the way, someone in Jay's office at the Conservatory Group says a dot within a circle is the Estonian symbol for death.

So? It's also the Boy Scout symbol for goodbye.

Eventually the art consultant and I decide that I will provide letters from a cross-section of authorities from different religious and ethnic groups certifying that these symbols do not offend any member of their constituency. (I didn't inquire if Jay also needed a letter from the director of the Queen Street Mental Health Centre.) I fumbled around, trying to discover who could and would testify in writing to the safeness of these symbols. Stephen Fong, an architect, wrote, "as a person of professional standing and member of the Chinese community, these symbols neither constitute offensive statements, nor do they have offensive meanings or connotations within Chinese cultural traditions." The art critic of *The Globe and Mail*, John Bentley Mays, found that "none of these ancient symbols … are of special importance in any living religion or ideology, eastern or western, with the following exceptions:

1. The triangle, which is a traditional Christian symbol for the Holy Trinity.

2. The encircled cross, which vaguely recalls the wafer used by Christians at Mass, but, more immediately, has been used as an identifying symbol by right-wing, racist groups such as the Western Guard."

This letter revealed a problem. The triangle – well, its usage was obviously far beyond that of a Christian symbol. But the circle bisected horizontally and vertically being associated with the racist Western Guard was of definite concern. By the third letter my confidence in the benign nature of these symbols was beginning to waiver ever so slightly.

Rodney Bobiwash, the race relations authority of the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, found the three symbols that represent man (as a sex, not as in "mankind") were problematic. "This symbol is a part of racist campaigns of organizations such as the Heritage Front." Now what? Now this archetypal stick figure representation of man, deriving its roots in Celtic symbolism is offensive because a small group of white supremacists have adopted it. This was the same symbol employed in the award-winning "Expo 67" logo: a circle made up of these interlocking stick-figure men. If we remove this symbol from this project have we conceded the right to use that symbol to the white supremacists? Was it to become as politically loaded as the swastika? We have definitely lost one symbol to the Nazis; was it necessary to concede another? But these really weren't even questions within the dialogue between Jay and his lawyers. The faintest hint of a problem was enough, over, finished, sales could definitely be affected.

I agreed to make modifications to the symbols. I removed the head from the man; he became two outstretched arms and a line for a body. I didn't mind cutting off the head. I've presented man without a head in other sculptural work; why not in a symbol? Was man more politically correct represented decapitated? Alright. I also took out one of the lines of the cross. Now the universe was bisected rather than in quadrants; it was a simpler universe that I now offered.

I submitted the revised symbols to six more authorities who found no further problems. There was even an impressive letter from Bernie M. Farber of the Canadian Jewish Congress, whose expertise was "neo-Nazi/racist symbols" and who declared the symbols free of any racist possibility. No one I asked could find a problem and most were dubious about anyone who could envision a problem. According to K. Corey Keeble of the ROM: "Most if not all of the symbols you have chosen are archetypes which have occurred in many cultures at different times. No one culture owns them or has special rights to them, though they may have been adopted by any number of different – even conflicting – groups."

But, no. Nothing could change Jay's mind. Revisions, what's the difference? Authorities, never mind. He restated his position that I could not certify that someone wasn't going to be offended and that the symbols were free of potential problems. A clause in the contract expressed his concern that "the Project as a whole nor any element thereof has any religious, ethnic or cultural content." He wanted what was impossible – an object without cultural content.

Maybe I just wasn't ready for the radical lessons Jay was teaching me about art, or for the shrug of his shoulders as he restated the potential danger of symbols to sales. Maybe I would have understood if I had studied his building's architecture for clues, if I had reflected on how seamlessly his

Symbols provided by Eldon Garnet

building blended into its surroundings, an almost perfect pastiche of benign elements with as little inspiration as was architecturally possible. Was that the answer to the puzzle of no cultural content? Had Jay been presenting me with a Platonic riddle? Was he really hoping for a work with no particular cultural meaning?

No, just no symbols. It was his building; he was the developer; he couldn't be forced to approve something that went against his better business sense. Anyway, it seems Jay had not voted for the project; he had been outvoted by the two art experts on the jury. There was this other nice project by Barbara Astman, the jury's second choice; he liked that one. How about that project? That would be OK with him. It's the one he wanted in the first place.

I gave up. We had been struggling for over a year – me, my lawyer, his lawyer, Jay – to no avail. Maybe he hadn't realized that, as the developer, he had the power to overrule the jury's recommendation at the time, which could have saved us both a lot of grief. Anyhow, Jay could have his way, no symbols. He was right, how could I ever hope to ensure the symbols would be offense-free through the future. There could never be complete certainty that the symbols were without some danger. He was his own proof. His persistent opposition proved that lurking in every symbol is danger, and maybe the more basic and primal the roots of the symbol the greater is this potential danger. Yes, Jay might be a pigheaded man, resentful at being outvoted on a project when it was his building, but he was also an invaluable instructor in the mysterious, irrational power of symbols.

I confess, I've never properly thanked Jay Liebfeld, this important instructor in my intellectual development, but how many of us ever really thank our teachers? Maybe someday I will be given the opportunity to erect a small monument to him, one we can visit to meditate on these symbols and the idea that symbols, like art, may lead to problems. There we can ponder whether or not it is best in business to play it safe.

Eldon Garnet is a Toronto artist and writer. He has made two major public works in Toronto: The Memorial to Commemorate the Chinese Railway Workers of Canada, located between the railway tracks approaching Union Station and Skydome; and a figurative sculpture installed in three sites outside the Metropolitan Toronto Police Headquarters. His novel, *Reading Brooke Shields: The Garden of Failure*, will be released by Semiotexte in New York this fall.

letters

As curator of "Revenge, Greed, Blackmail," at the Edmonton Art Gallery last summer, I would like to respond to "Questioning Banners," the discussion between Joyce Mason and David Garneau in C 44. The piece oversimplifies a very complex exhibition and a difficult set of decisions.

While the article implies that a disservice was done to Alastair MacKinven, it fails to put the exhibition in any sort of context. What was "RGB" about? (Youth culture.) What were its components? (T-shirts, chapbooks and banners.) What agreement existed between Cousins (artist) and me (curator)? (Many, including one that the bomb recipes would be non-functional.) Where was the work designed to be exhibited? (Throughout rural and urban Alberta.) How did the exhibition accommodate these locations? (By being subtly subversive rather than in-your-face.) Some of these answers would have filled out some of the concerns raised.

I also question how the issues around the exhibition are situated: the oppressive eye of "the state" was not the impetus for refusing to accept MacKinven's work in the exhibition of Charles Cousins. The work arrived three weeks late, on the night before an already postponed installation date. As curator I chose not to exhibit the work because it was neither integral to the exhibition nor cohesive enough to be shown on the outside of the gallery. It was a difficult decision made in consultation with both Cousins and gallery director Alf Bogusky. Unfortunately, MacKinven was unavailable when a quick decision was needed.

The issue that the article merely raises, rather than exploring, is perhaps the most crucial: what are the rights of an artist contracted by another artist? Furthermore, in mentioning issues of censorship in the introduction, the discussion that follows is set in a context that conflates issues of censorship and artists' rights. There were obviously many more complicating pragmatic factors in this exhibition. Coincidentally, my article "Artists and Art Institutions: Adversaries or Allies?" in the fall issue of *Parallelogramme* does explore a number of these tensions between artists and institutions in Canada.

There remains a more general rationalization of why a civic gallery would be unwilling to put up directions for home-made bombs facing a civic square, although, given recent bombings in Canada and the devastating explosion in Oklahoma, perhaps this is obvious. While art that explores how individuals can make civic protests is timely, what MacKinven delivered through Cousins was merely inciteful.

Jeffrey Black, former curator, Edmonton Art Gallery