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The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Resistance in the New Age of Everyday Life

ANARCHIST SURVIVAL GATHERING

Toronto
July 1-4, 1988

by Dot Tuer

The implements are deliberately large in size, therefore accomodating themselves to a North American market accustomed to handling large portions of meat. This large scale is typical of North American domestic products and symbolically reflects a feeling of surplus and plenty characteristic of the society for which they are produced, and whose values they are intended to reinforce.

Curator's statement accompanying a Four-Piece Barbeque Set (1985); designed by Michael Dallaine and manufactured by Danesco Inc. Exhibited in *Art in Everyday Life: Aspects of Canadian Design 1967-1987*, Powerplant, Harbourfront, Toronto, June 24 - Sept. 11, 1988.

Things become clearer when we acknowledge that we are moving from a hardware to a software economy in our urban centres. Rather than producing artifacts like textiles or other manufactured goods, we now produce and market 'Experiences' and 'Lifestyle' and the endless array of peripheral objects essential to the achievement of both.

John Scott, "The Trojan Horse" in *Vanguard*, April/May 1988.

TORONTO is not L.A., at least, not yet. With the exception of a few Queen Street bars/DJs gone New Age and the ominous escalation of concrete around Harbourfront and the Dome, the landscape still resembles Toronto the Good of the '50's and not the simulated distopia of Bladerunner. But the prophecies are not optimistic, the signs do not bode well. Toronto the Good struggling to become Toronto the Bad is in the process of becoming UGLY. It began, long ago, with the forced relocation of the indigenous peoples from Lake Ontario's shores. In the second act, development was built on the back of racist immigration policies and labour banished from history books; retold in classrooms as the benign liberalism of multiculturalism. The climax of this capitalism as cooperation begins in June, 1984 + 4, when the Summit Seven dine at the Art Gallery of Ontario and Canadian citizens begin to think of landscape painting in terms of a week long set staged in a parking lot a stone's throw from Metro's glasshouse convention centre. The end of the script has not yet been completed, but the first draft has been approved at City Hall, featuring Toronto's triumphant hosting of the 1992 Olympics. By then, Harbourfront will have become a milelong wall

protecting a view of the waterfront for the rich, and the Group of Seven will not only be confused with the Summit Seven, but redundant: Free Trade creating a Hollywood of the North and the production of art relegated to vast warehouses where artists manufacture piecework for sculptures adorning Fifth Avenue in New York.

No longer will CSIS have to search in Bloor Street pubs for suspected terrorists in an effort to prove that Toronto, as a world-class city, has its problems too. The developing nations, fed up with an information blockade and Canadian Bank starvation policies, will arrive incognito to make sure their side of the story gets told. The Olympics, offering the perfect opportunity, will clean out Parkdale, the last stronghold preventing the downtown core from resembling a gigantic Yorkville. Helicopters, making their first chorus appearance at the Summit, will have become an everyday opera, patrolling the city to clear the streets of undesirables. Police on foot patrol will insure that all suspicious characters have their passes which allow them access past the barbwire demarcation of rich and poor that protects the city from the likes of Hamilton, Finch Avenue, and Oshawa. Passes, of-course, will not only

be issued for day labour in the technology ghettos of wordprocessing and telecommunications, but offered on Sundays so that the "general public" can roam the downtown area, consuming processed culture at the strategic castles of air built or expanded to house ART in the late 1980's.

And you thought only L.A. could be featured as a set for Bladerunner?

These paranoid delusions, of course, unless properly disguised as fiction or paraded as the constitutionally-enshrined right of individuals to artistic nihilism, will land you in the labyrinth of the "mental health" system, thiorazine promising your dolpine nerves a foggy relief from inappropriate thought patterns. So best not to dwell in the netherland of prophesy, best to consider alternative visions.

The Anarchist Unconvention, timed to follow the Summit extravaganza by two weeks, offered Toronto just such a chance to reconsider its Bladerunner future; offered citizens of this fine city the opportunity to attend a three-day wingding replete with workshops, affinity groups, co-operative feasts, music, performances, a Sunday park picnic, demos, and as rumours will have it, an orgy with separate rooms for men, women and those of mixed (read heterosexual) persuasions. Not unlike the Summit, the media had a specially assigned location. Locked in at the Convention parking lot, they were locked out of 519 Church St. Community Centre where visions of a New Age without Yuppies were unfolding.

Anarchism, should some of you have forgotten, or have misplaced your secondary high school textbooks, emerges as a critique of state-engineered revolutions, dispensing with the authoritarianism of the vanguard and the brokerage politics of trade unionism in favour of a spontaneous withering away of capitalism through a worker's mass uprising and fight against oppression. From Emma Goldman to Murray Bookchin, many have claimed its title. Many more have been claimed, including indigenous struggles and Lizzie Borden's film *Born In Flames*.¹ Contrary to mass-media representation, anarchism is not just libertarianism or bomb-throwing men waving black flags, but a serious philosophy coming to grips with a world where Bladerunner is beginning to look like a fairytale in comparison to the threats of capitalist greed breeding genetic mutation, apartheid, genocide, counter-insurgency slaughter, nuclear annihilation and environmental extinction.

Anarchism is also, in the everyday of the present, contained within and contaminated

University Avenue, Toronto, 1988. Expressing outrage at the U.S. downing of an Iranian airbus, and celebrating the success of the 4-day Anarchist Survival Gathering, demonstrators engaged in running street battles with Metro Police. Three officers and an undetermined number of demonstrators were injured. Thirty-one were arrested.



with historical contingencies. The nature of work and class are shifting as technology moves North America from the Industrial Age to the Information Age. Critiques of sexism and racism have redefined the terms of the struggle and located within the external conditions of labour internalized and institutionalized sites of oppression. Even the most local of resistance must peripherally account for the global implications of our everyday lives. Everytime we go to the bank, eat an irradiated tomato, drink beer, use a computer, watch television, drive to work, we are participating in a lifestyle economy that is exploiting human labour across the world, gobbling the earth's resources, and polluting its surface. In North America, resistance and revolution is no longer simply the clear and clarion denunciation of visible oppressions but also a struggle against a diffuse system of power in which we are both inside and outside of its shadowy confines.

In this very complicated scenario, in this our land of plenty accustomed to eating lots of meat, the Anarchist Unconvention workshops reflected the shifting sites of resistance, more an eclectic free-for-all towards empowerment than a serious re-evaluation of an already initiated revolution. Despite the off-the-wall or right-on titles of the sixty-three workshops, (ranging from Radical Ecology to Pagan Spirituality to Dumpster Living), the discussions offered the possibility of linking experience with issues, fantasies with reality, and fictions with action. As a counter-culture fashion show swirled around and about 519 Church St., groups involved with indigenous issues, prisoner's rights, the psychiatrized, ecology, gay liberation, anti-racism, subversive arts and feminism charted strategies to re-envision a world without capitalism.

While discussion proved the fertile ground of social inter-changes, the activists among

the talkers were restless. In pre-planning meetings, they mused over specifically "anarchist" notions of demonstrations. Tentatively listing their "actions" as a Lunch-In at Yorkville and a Bare-In (of wimmin's breasts, that is) at Nathan Phillips Square, a meeting was called during the Sunday picnic to discuss further notions of public resistance. Sunday, glorious and sunny, created the perfect atmosphere for a country fair. Behind Scadding Court Community Centre, three or four hundred people showed up to hang-out, to network, and to listen to a variety of readings and bands. Meetings scattered throughout the park wrapped up the weekend's discussions and planned for on-going solidarity. Under a tree a group of people practised self-defence against invisible riot police while behind the mainstage the Direct Action discussion was planning Monday's spontaneous happenings. Drifting in and out of the discussion, which took a



dramatic turn in focus with the US downing of an Iranian Airbus, it seemed that the group of people battling out collective process had organized everything except why they were to be arrested.

As cops strolled through the gathering two by two, and a singer on the stage with pink shredded hair screamed "I've wasted my life," the Direct Action assembly thought long and hard about whether to demonstrate at eleven or at noon. Someone suggested that noon was a "traditional" time for a demonstration. Someone else wanted to know what would be the specifically "anarchist" nature of the demonstration. A woman suggested spraypainting, provoking a retort about the danger of being arrested on conspiracy to harm public property. Finally, a group of people, impatient and fed up with "wasting their lives" suggested that the whole picnic march spontaneously to the American Embassy. The retort came quickly: no one was dressed properly for a demonstration. Protest had become a "lifestyle" issue.

The violence which ensued the following day illustrated, of course, that regardless of form and uniform, free-wheeling demonstrations and cop-and-robber games with police are not the state's notion of an appropriate "lifestyle." Within the combat zone of Monday's skirmishes, which ranged from the

United States' consulate to City Hall to up-town Bloor Street, the police finally got their chance to crack a few skulls. Revved up and restless, like souped-up Fords idling too long after the last rumble at the Summit demo where 3,000 people marched illegally down University Avenue on June 19, the police strutted their billyclubs like lethal dildos, brutally informing anarchists of their limited rights of dissent in a city renowned for its clean streets and clean living. The prediction of one anarchist, frustrated by the inaction of the Sunday picnic, that the police would return to the copshop saying "Next time, ask for the anarchist unconvention, it's the easiest beat," was proved wrong in Monday's full-scale assault.

But what does this all add up to: this potpourri of resistance to the state?

By appearance only, it seemed to be a cross between a Marx Brother's film and Gidget Goes Yippie with hundreds of discontented youths, primarily of white and middle-class extraction, gathered to express a disenfranchisement from the oppressor class more imagined than real in its construction. As a group, the anarchists seemed to owe more to the hippie and punk movements, to the notion of "dropping out and tuning in," than the historical continuum of their anarchist heroes. Their perception of the enemy seemed to be

identified with those who were STRAIGHT, REPRESSED or PIGS. But perhaps in a society where packaging creates the product, and lifestyle creates the market, anarchists are caught in a consumer vortex where style is perceived as an essential component of dissent. If the art of everyday living is reflected in over-sized barbecue instruments created as an offering to a surplus-commodity economy, the need to differentiate oneself from the assumed values of plenty may inevitably draw people into the paradox of the countercultural stance.

This notion of inevitability, of course, does more to create predictable reaction than viable resistance to state oppression. I, for one, favour more subversive and less flamboyant means of fighting the rise of Yuppiedom and the swing to a self-congratulatory right-wing. Parading one's political colours like stripes on a sleeve seems to leave one particularly vulnerable to state oppression while the very term anarchist allows for a plethora of misunderstandings to be hurled one's way, particularly in a North American context. Yet the Anarchist Unconvention, for all its contradictions and lack of obvious focus in its generalized discontent at all and everything wrong with the world (and that's plenty), cannot be easily dismissed. For despite the frustration I personally felt with the



Illustration by Culver Pictures.

The Haymarket Square Incident, Chicago, 1884. The police advanced, unprovoked, during an anarchist/labour gathering which was in the process of disassembling. A bomb exploded, killing one person. The police opened fire, killing 6 or 7 workers, as well as 6 of their own men. Six others, none of whom were present at the time of the bombing, were hanged for conspiracy.

white middle-class angst emanating from the pores of many of the participants, better a chaotic resistance to a land of plenty than the skinhead fashions and braintead fascism of those aspiring to claim a stake in the new society.

This does not mean to imply, however, that the anarchists' strategies are necessarily successful. Politically, their notion of disrupting a passive status quo through extravagant gestures of style ends up alienating rather than constructing potential alliances while their fire-fighting strategies seem to feed into the media hype and police brutality they so vehemently decry. For those involved with armed struggle against US intervention in underdeveloped nations, the anarchists' laissez-faire attitude towards self-determination must seem frivolous at the best and certainly naive in its estimation of the opposition. And one can be sure that the anarchists' notion of difference does not jive with the determined and focused resistance of political struggle demonstrated at the ANC People's Picnic for Mandela's 70th birthday, nor does it speak to the many Torontonians involved in solidarity struggles.

Culturally, the anarchists' sprawling embrace of creativity-for-all veers dangerously close to a liberal notion of expressionist angst. Left out in the cold in this riotous

abandon of spraypainting and grandstanding are those who are struggling to make quieter, more focused cultural and political interventions. Grace Channer's installation at A Space on the African diaspora, Janice Bowley and Oliver Kellhammer's ecological critique at Mercer Union and Jim Anderson's Home Improvement installation around issues of renovation, displacement and homelessness at 9 Wascana Street are just a few of the visual events about town which do not make the flamboyant headlines of the anarchists' free-for-all experience as the art of everyday life.

Yet in a New Age where hegemony is ideal corporate culture, the happening of the Anarchist Survival Gathering is an important if seemingly misdirected celebration of resistance to an ever encroaching system of state control. Wandering about the picnic on Sunday, frustrated by what I perceived as a gathering of self-styled "revolutionaries" who could not figure out the enemy, a woman told me how important this weekend had been, how for the first time she had been included in a process of decision making. She had attended the same workshop of the psychiatrized I had on the Saturday, a workshop where a number of people silenced by this society were able to speak. And it is for these people that the Anarchist Unconvention

served as a valuable framing of alternative sites of struggle, serving to empower the disconnected of our society who are often unaccounted for by groups which tightly define the parameters of social, cultural, and political change. For in an information age where people are not encouraged to think, in a land of plenty where the average rent of a basement apartment is \$600 and the average monthly salary of an artist with a grant is \$1,000 (more than double that of welfare), and in a market of lifestyles where culture has become the postmodernist apology for doctrine without conviction, the Anarchist Unconvention offered a weekend where the notion of the "margin" was not a trendy word to fling about in art magazines, but a healthy opposition to Powerplant's vision of art in the everyday life of Canadian citizens. ■

1. "Anarcha-Filmmaker: An Interview with Lizzie Borden" in *Kick It Over*, No.18, Spring 1987; probably the best anarchist magazine around, featuring articles and commentary on cultural, political, and social issues. Available on newsstands and by writing KICK IT OVER, P.O. Box 5811, Station A, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5W 1P2.