



Faculty of Art

1996

The American hangover: The American Trip, The Power Plant, Toronto

Doyle, Judith

Suggested citation:

Doyle, Judith (1996) The American hangover: The American Trip, The Power Plant, Toronto. Fuse Magazine, 19 (4). pp. 45-47. ISSN 0838-603X Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1906/>

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THE AMERICAN HANGOVER

The American Trip

LARRY CLARK, NAN GOLDIN, CADY NOLAND, RICHARD PRINCE

CURATED BY PHILIP MONK

THE POWER PLANT CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY, TORONTO, FEBRUARY 2–APRIL 8, 1996

REVIEW BY JUDITH DOYLE

The Power Plant's recent exhibition "The American Trip" is a sampling of photography and photo-based sculpture by four New York artists. The lineup includes Larry Clark, Nan Goldin, Cady Noland and Richard Prince; the material has been widely exposed and written about in the States. It is recycled with a resigned, unapologetically morning-after attitude that's as common as a chronic hangover in this town. The rationale for "The American Trip" is probably the Larry Clark phenomenon. He's the celebrity director of the AIDSploitational feature *Kids*, and his portrait style has been replicated in an epidemic of Calvin Klein ads. It's not surprising that some Toronto curator would fetishize Clark's prints, enveloping his images of youth in "the traditional discourse of connoisseurship."¹ The show asks us to consider this group of artists in historic terms, but what is immediately striking about "The American Trip" is its nostalgia for the days when Toronto artists and curators withered in the presence of the New York avant garde. The word "nostalgia" recalls a pertinent Baudrillard quote: "When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality...a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential."²

On the cover of the exhibition catalogue is a vertically cropped black and white photo by Larry Clark of two naked white kids — a girl, hitting up, and a boy (face and genitals obscured) tying her arm. Alongside this image is a detail from Cady Noland's

OOZEWALD — an oddball sculpture including a larger than life blow-up of a wire service photo of Lee Harvey Oswald imprinted on sheet metal, with big holes in it. A crumpled up U.S. flag-bandanna sticks out of *OOZEWALD*'s nose. The holes are supposedly from bullets, the sculpture evoking a Puritan stockade for the public shaming of criminals, or a photo facade that you stick your head into, like the Mr. Pong's Chinese Food Panda Bear placard on Queen Street West. Actually, the photo-sculpture is more like an arcade-from-hell beanbag target. The layout of these images — in vertical stripes on a matte-varnished twenty-five dollar a pop oversize catalogue — seems tired, like a gloomy perfume ad with a guilt complex.

Larry Clark's pictures in the exhibit are of nude teens shooting drugs, gang bangs, and rather arty-looking pseudo porn shots of kids faking suicides. The "kids" have a posing, blasé, "whatever" look on their faces that is endearingly inept. The photographs are discreetly sized, printed, framed and installed in a classy, sober institutional style denoting "timeless value." But for me these black-edged floating matte boxes function like cryogenic containment chambers, sealing off the audience from contamination while preserving "the moment," a much-coveted brief bloom of self-conscious coolness when pubescent whores and users



OOZEWALD, Cady Noland, 1989-90, silkscreened ink on aluminum cut-out with flag, 183 x 122 x 0.95 cm. Photo courtesy of the artist.

can cash in on their looks with old rich men. Bass notes are struck in various pictures including a half-naked, very pregnant woman banging up, a child's coffin and a wincing gunshot victim.

For his catalogue text, Philip Monk adopts a dry expository style, without the "theoretic-fictive" flourishes of his "Violence and Representation" essay, which he cannibalizes here. In "Larry Clark: Outlaw Artist," he keeps a straight face when noting, "How appropriate to have an artist in

this exhibition who has led an outlaw existence — not that he came to art as rehabilitation in prison; Clark produced his art while he was on the loose as an outlaw.” After counting the word “outlaw” forty five times in this essay, the connective thread between the works was obvious: at the Power Plant Gallery, “outlaws” are “in-laws” again.

The catalogue reminds us that Clark and Goldin photographed their “communities” of “friends”: “These were (Larry Clark’s) friends, and he wanted to make them appear attractive. That love shows.... (In the ‘Teenage Lust’ series, he documents) the next generation, the younger kids, brothers and sisters of his friends, and their experiences with sex and drugs... the kids that would henceforth be his enduring theme and trademark.” Monk shimmies down the family tree to show that fifty-three year-old art

essay, recalling Warhol of the Studio 54 and “Interview” years.

“The American Trip,” seen through the Larry Clark and Richard Prince material, is really a play of authorities; American art stars on top of a bleary-eyed crop of kid-tricks, crack-dead infants and biker-chicks, passed off as awaiting representational rescue, seen from the vantage point of Toronto as the “new VR” suburbia. The days are invoked when it was still delightfully awkward to be around the raw careerist momentum of artists like Larry Clark, and to watch it play out in their photographs.

Richard Prince’s blurry reprints of “biker chick” snapshots from motorcycle magazines are sometimes collaged with Tom of Finland-type homoerotic drawings, in a way that blandly situates these images on a continuum of white trash. Philip Monk

alternative zine-type culture on the Power Plant’s walls. I’d rather see the Toronto queer punk zines, graf zines, dyke zines, etc. that “image” youth, with cross-boundary writing amalgamating personal stories, sex fantasy, music notes, vegan recipes and social critique, all in two-point type, sans copyright clearance.

Cady Noland’s photo-based sculptures were in the back room of the Power Plant, off-line from the rest of the show. She recycles photographs of creepy celebrity-killers like *OOZEWALD* and Charlie Manson, attended by his spaced-out “family” of female hippies, who are lumped together in the catalogue with the biker chicks in “the girls next door” outlaw category. Maybe Charlie Manson is supposed to operate as the super-ego of the show, as an authority stand-in. Monk speculates, “(Noland) selected Manson because he is an outlaw who is both a psychopath and a con man. The con man and psychopath are outsiders who play the game of the insider and seek to control that game to the detriment (and sometimes death) of the other. If the con man declines to operate within society, he still duplicates the corporate model....” The familiar “classic” wire service photos of Manson, Oswald and Patty Hearst elicit a flashback response like “classic” TV shows on CKVR do — more “déjà vu” than critique. (Remember the “Star Trek” episode with all the bad guys from history on one team?). The images are mounted on sheet metal to look like printer’s plates, or life-size die-cut figures in video stores. The steel has a modernist sculptural tactility that further depletes the content of the squeezed-dry images. Noland’s sculpture had little impact compared to the straightforward photographs.

In the “Nan Goldin: Sexual Outlaws” section of the catalogue, we are told that “[p]ortraits of subcultures are perhaps most authentic when they are self-representations of communities by artist-



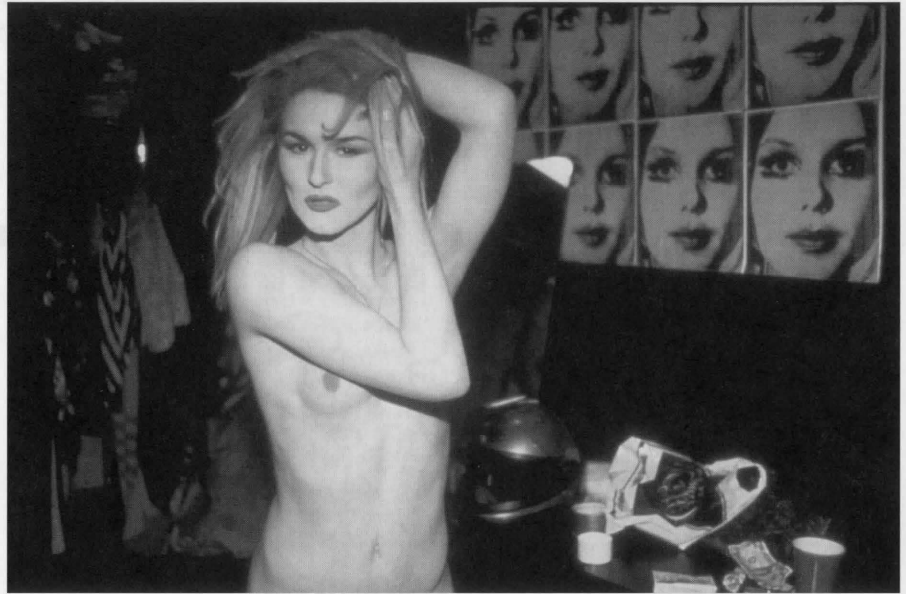
Untitled, Larry Clark, 1991. Photo courtesy Luhring Augustine.

star Larry Clark is a great friend of his “trademark” luckless teens. I find this whole line of authorization dated. Such claims of friendship seem fresher in farces about New York social climbers like “Bonfire of the Vanities.” Monk does make several references to Tom Wolfe’s “statuspheres,” but not to “Bonfires” and its elitist New York milieu. In the same vein, there is something nostalgically, sycophantically Margaret Trudeau-esque in the frequency of the word “Warhol” in this

seems unsure what to say about Prince in the catalogue: “I am writing this essay taking a hit from scattered cues in Richard Prince’s writings and interviews, as if two turntables were playing on either side of me, mixing and blurring sounds and images from another era.” Reissuing the biker reprint series may be an attempt to historicize rave, hip-hop and zine cultures, in terms of Prince’s shallow-end pilfering. I spoke to some people who liked this show because they thought it was fresh and affirming to see some vestige of

members.” This valorization of “authentic portraits” seems hollow and outdated, though I realize that, like the bell bottom, the old-fashioned lowlife documentary is making something of a comeback. At first, I didn’t think this selection of Nan Goldin photos had much to do with the other material in the show, because the forthcoming, self-assured attitude of the drag queens dismantles the superiority of the photographer and viewers, and is free of the whole “doomed” thing. However, in the catalogue, Philip Monk claims that Goldin’s work “exemplifies the themes of this exhibition: the fascination with the outlaw....” To prove his point, he offensively informs us that the drag queens are, in fact, doomed: “[Nan Goldin’s] style approximates the unselfconsciousness of her subjects — her friends — as they go about partying, living, loving, and for some, as we know in retrospect, soon to be dying.” The curatorial premise for Nan Goldin’s inclusion is based on her celebrity. “Nan Goldin: Sexual Outlaws” completes the catalogue essay and sums up the themes of the exhibition. It begins with a rehash of David Livingstone’s “The Goldin Years” from the fashion section of *The Globe and Mail*, describing her international art shows and the welcome mat laid out for her on Paris runways. Primed with her résumé, Monk asserts that “... artists are responsible for the images and scenarios by which subcultures are popularized. Their own personal celebrity increases the circle of reception, and their cultural authority legitimates identification with hitherto social outcasts.... Such displacement of identification onto the image of the outlaw is always dangerous to society.”

If the curatorial rationale is threatening to the status quo, we don’t get much of a picture of how this danger operates. There are mentions in the catalogue of kids murdering their parents. These crop up with truly Oedipal repetitiveness. Larry



Cody in the Dressing Room at the Boy Bar, NYC, Nan Goldin, 1991.

Clark muses on the topic in a quote reminiscent of the Zen koan on the sound of one hand clapping — “I was thinking about things you couldn’t photograph. How are you going to document a kid killing their parents? How are you going to be there when a kid dies from autoerotic asphyxiation?” Underneath the dangerous outlaw rhetoric, this exhibition reasserts the superlativeness of American artists, the delicious authority of their violence in representation. “The American Trip” returns us to the days when a subject of a photo was just a subject, a trick was just a trick, and every place else was Not New York. It puts “outlaws” in their place, which is to say, poor, sick and capitalizing on every possible asset.

Monk cites the landmark book of photos by Robert Frank called *The Americans*, with an introduction by Jack Kerouac, which has all the octane and emotional warmth this show lacks. In the spirit of nostalgia, I offer this Kerouac quote:

As American as a picture—the faces dont editorialize or criticize or say anything but “This is the way we are in real life and if you dont like it I don’t know anything about it ‘cause I’m living my own life my way and may God bless us all, mebbe”... plant your prisons in the basin of the Utah moon—nudge Canadian groping

lands that end in Arctic bays, purl your Mexican ribneck, America—we’re going home, going home.³

In a recent episode of the popular tv cop show “Homicide,” the mother of a dead teen and the mother of his murderer share a Baltimore police-station sofa. They chat about moving to Canada, where it snows all the time. There’s an ironic edge to this script of the familiar American rescue fantasy of “Canada,” an irony that was missing when “The American Trip” washed up on the waterfront at the Power Plant. Will the fictional mothers be surprised to find that their old “friend” Larry Clark is waiting for them here?

Judith Doyle is a Toronto writer and filmmaker. She wrote and directed the recent feature film Wasaga, and teaches in the Integrated Media program of the Ontario College of Art.

Notes

1. Andy Grundberg, “Photography in the Age of Electronic Simulation,” in *Crisis of the Real: Writings on Photography 1974–1989* (New York: Aperture, 1990).
2. J. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, cited in *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, John Storey (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1993), p. 165.
3. Robert Frank, *The Americans*, introduction by Jack Kerouac (New York: Grossman, 1969).