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Modernism, Parametricism
and Contemporary Aesthetics
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Cultural appropriation
of the Other assuages
feelings of deprivation
and lack that assault
the psyches of radi-
cal white youth who
choose to be disloyal
to western civilization.

—bell hooks, “Eating the Other” in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992)

GRAPHIC INTERVENTIONS

Chester Brown at the Art Gallery of Ontario

There is a particularly ubiquitous breed of nostalgia alive in the Georgia Ridley Salon at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Aside from being a familiar scene for perennial AGO-goers, the salon drips curatorial convention. Its walls painted a deep muted pink and hung tightly, floor-to-ceiling, with ornate gold frames, it is representative of the now-established gesture of the major museum salon hang. As the stand-in for the Art Institute of Chicago in the 2012 Hollywood movie *The Vow*, the salon hang in the European wing of the AGO evinces the interchangeability of salon sites: any gallery's salon is an effective substitute for any other's, so long as it follows the established formula.

Intended to mimic the atmosphere of academic art exhibitions in the 19th century, this salon at the AGO is fundamentally disjointed—and we like and expect it that way. It exists as a heritage re-creation in an emphatically contemporary building, a small space knit with history in an institution that continually asserts its modern desirability. The works represented in the salon vary in style and content, but represent a slice of acceptable and interesting subject matter from 1867-1917, the initial years during which the Ontario Society of Artists organized their annual juried exhibitions in this style.[1] Consisting largely of conventional oil portraits, landscapes, pastoral and domestic scenes, the works hung in the salon trace a view of Canada's art scene and stylistic entanglements (from the picturesque to the impressionistic).

On the centre wall of the salon a relatively small, framed ink drawing further reveals the salon's anachronism: a portrait of Louis Riel by Toronto cartoonist Chester Brown.

Many may not immediately recognize the subject. Andrew Hunter, Frederick S. Eaton Curator of Canadian Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario noted during a symposium in November that “if you grew up in Toronto, up until Chester's book, you probably didn't know anything about Louis Riel.” [2]



Hunter describes Chester Brown's work in the salon as an intervention—one in a series of planned on-going interventions into the Art Gallery of Ontario's collection. Placing the work in dialogue with what he deems the salon's "nation building narrative," the intervention is geared to re-thinking which actors have shaped Canada's history. A didactic panel next to Riel's portrait suggests that depictions of key historical figures and events are missing, and that the intervention of the portrait into the Salon is an attempt to address these omissions.

While the inclusion of Riel is admirable (especially in its attempts to re-assess the presence of Ontario artists within the institution), the intervention of Brown's comic into the AGO Canadian Collection represents several fundamental confusions: between the illusion of contemporary and historical within the institution; between inclusion and exclusion; between high and low art; and between the perceptions of appropriate subject matter for major public galleries.

Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography, first published in 2003, is an anomalous kind of comic—thoroughly researched and painstakingly crafted, it makes a definite case for the emerging genre of non-fiction comics. It is tightly drawn, with six uniformly sized panels to a page, by turns sparse and densely detailed. The narrative follows Riel and the Métis people through conflict with English speaking settlers and the newly-founded Dominion of Canada, the establishment of a provisional government after seizing Fort Garry (now Winnipeg), Riel's escape to the United States, return, election to Parliament, later exile from Canada, the Battle of Fish Creek, the Battle of Batoche and, finally, Riel's hanging for treason at the hands of the Canadian government in 1885.

Despite the easy association with the glossy (and glossed-over) histories told in pop culture, Brown's perspective on Riel is nuanced and even equivocal. Throughout the book, Riel's devout Catholicism and stubborn-nature shine as Chester Brown crafts a complex portrait of a figure who, though often viewed in a heroic light and openly acknowl-

edged as a founder of Manitoba, remains unpardoned in any official capacity. Brown's own politics, as he notes, drew him to Riel's biography, where he saw his own anti-authoritarian politics reflected in the under-celebrated eccentricities of the Métis leader. Brown's then-identification as an anarchist morphed, as he worked on the book, to a more libertarian stance—a politic which informs and complicates his view of Riel as an iconic dissident.

In the adjoining Max and Madeline Clarkson Studio original artwork from the Louis Riel graphic novel, including the scene of Riel's flight from Fort Garry and a later sequence depicting his hanging, afford the opportunity for closer inspection. Brown's delicate drawings are seductive at their original scale, where Wite-Out splotches and paste-up corrections which are imperceptible on the printed page become fascinating, attesting to the laborious process of the book. Brown describes the pieces in the installation as essential places where silent panels force a slow and contemplative read of the work. "So much of the book," Brown says, "because I had to cram so much information into such a short space, it goes very quickly, and I tend to like the scenes that go more slowly." [3]

For Brown, the small installation and intervention are opportunities for the slow reading and formal (pictorial) decoding of the work, places to sit with Riel. This, he suggests, is the advantage of the gallery space over the printed page. And, on this, he and curator Andrew Hunter appear to agree: that comics deserve their appropriate time and their due as legitimate art media.

Hunter is not unfamiliar with curating the work of cartoonists. In 2009, as part of RENDER at the University of Kitchener Waterloo, Hunter organized a national tour of Guelph-based cartoonist Seth's "Dominion City." The exhibition expanded the artist's vision of the fictional Ontario Dominion City into the realm of scale models, drawing from the mid-20th century architectural conventions of booming Canadian cit-

ies. In collaboration with Hunter, Seth realized parts of his city at full-scale inside the gallery, populating a life-sized imitation of an 1940s-style theatre with early National Film Board documentaries at the exhibition's stop in the Kitchener Waterloo Art Gallery's Eastman Gallery.

The salon intervention is a different case: it has already been identified as a site within the AGO where omissions run rampant. Re-designed as part of the Art Gallery of Ontario's *Transformation* project in 2008, it is already an institutionally curated meditation on itself and its own history. In imitation of French academic exhibitions, salon exhibitions in Canada, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, were exclusive spaces, privileging a model of professionalism inherited from the European system. The associated visual tropes of those historical exhibitions resonate through the genre of the salon-style hang (and the Georgia Ridley Salon at the AGO) and so does the corresponding privileged professionalism. In this sense, the salon operates as an educational tool as much as an aesthetic strategy: it serves to describe, by some combination of visual evocation and historical explication, the history of evaluative systems in art institutions.

In a curated move to correct and question some of this exclusionary evaluation, Georgiana Uhlyarik, the Salon's curator for 2008's re-hang, aims to address women's inclusion early Canadian salons. In her current curation, Uhlyarik imagines how salon exhibitions might have appeared if women artists of the time had the privilege of being considered professionals [**bodies such as the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts and the Ontario Society of Artists forbade women members at the time**], and, resultantly, been given opportunities to exhibit and sell their work in an academic context [4]. Something of this inclusion of women's work is apparent, even without reference to the gallery's didactic panels. As Linda Nochlin notes, systemic barriers to academic art-making success for women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries resulted in limited availability of subject matter and training [5]. Even in the grandiose medium of oil paint, the small-scale, the domestic, the everyday and the informal parade across the walls of the salon. Meanwhile, works on the longest (and chronologically latest) wall by Mary E. Wrinch and Kathleen Munn show immense foresight: Wrinch's *Saw Mill* is an early depiction of industrialization in Canada, while Munn's work heralds in abstraction, a visionary quality for which she was recognized during her life, but which was later all-but forgotten [6].

Uhlyarik's curation of the Salon at the AGO ensures that it already presents an unconventional, even feminist view of Canada and Canadian painting. Only a few of the works in the salon present what we might typically recognize as Hunter's "nation-building narrative," with early landscapes and pastoral scenes suggesting something of settlement, and later landscapes describing cities and industry. Bureaucracy and government policy barely make appearances on the walls of the Salon, save in George A. Reid's *The Other Side of the Question*, which depicts debate in a small town council chamber. And while women performing domestic duties at home, workers in fields, children in costume, pots of flowers, figures reading, freshly-hunted game and painters painting are surely markers of Canada's culture at the time, they are not the heroic nationalist icons Hunter's intervention seeks to counter. Rather, the Salon reveals the subject matter and lives of 19th and 20th century artists, and whispers stories of the developing Toronto art scene, artists' social circles and daily affairs.

There is something to be said for disrupting the idea that these subjects are not culturally charged shepherds of insidious cultural control. (We know that in the 19th and 20th centuries, as today, culture has been a mechanism of dominance.) And this may be the goal of Hunter's larger interventional curation into the collection. The latest step in the project has been the inclusion of Meryl McMaster's *Victoria* (from a series of photographs exploring overlapping Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian identities), a work that questions the naturalness of European cultural signifiers in Canadian contexts. Not prepared to denounce this necessary and important premise (the result of which remains to unfold the AGO collection), I wonder whom the portrait of Riel responds to, in a salon curation that is refreshingly free of portraits of great men. Heroic portraiture is at best a digressive response to the narratives of subtle cultural coercion.

The more radical move in the intervention-exhibition is the inclusion of comics as a medium. Against the rigid requirements of historical academic painting, comics are a powerful reminder that artwork need not adhere to the conventions

of fine art to be good, serious or engaging. The curatorial intention to legitimize comics is solidified by the adjoining mini-exhibition of original pages from *Louis Riel*—an additional nod to the work and the book, accompanied by talks at the Art Gallery of Ontario by and about Chester Brown at the time the installation of his work in the collection was revealed. The ceremoniousness to this intervention, its lack of subtlety and the public declaration of its presence recall Andrea Fraser's claim that Institutional Critique has become a gesture performed both inside of and around the institution, which enables public evaluation of the ways the museum represents itself as a critical body. [7]

Comics and art blogger Robert Boyd notes, in reference to Seth's "Dominion City" exhibition, that curatorial instincts governing cartoonists' work often veer towards the pop-cultural—to putting comics together in exhibitions with other works that reflect a popular aesthetic. He suggests that this premise is faulty because, rather than provide the opportunity for gallery publics to engage with the thematic and conceptual nature of comics, it affirms only a surface-level interest in the contemporaneity and popularity of the medium [8]. Championing comics requires more than simply the inclusion of comics, but the serious treatment of their content—a step that the Art Gallery of Ontario's intervention has not yet achieved.

Hunter's decision to champion this particular work of Chester Brown's is strange in that *Louis Riel* (although an excellent work) is not particularly representative of Brown's production. Much of Brown's work deals with sexuality and the sex industry, from the discomfort of navigating adolescent sexuality in *I Never Liked You* to the influence of Playboy magazine on the author's sexuality and perceptions of race in *The Playboy*. Brown's most recent graphic novel, *Paying for It*, continues his exploration of sex work and transactional sex via an account of his experience as a John. Much of Brown's work is darkly humorous and improvisational, almost

stream-of-consciousness, and his earlier short self-published comics, anthologized as *The Little Man* and *Ed the Happy Clown*, betray a fascination with the legacy of surrealism—one that resonates with innumerable contemporary artists working with surrealist aesthetic strategies.

The decision to include this particular work in an intervention—slotting it into an exhibition space with minimal context—may be motivated by the false perception that the rest of Brown’s work would not be appropriate within the greater context of the AGO. In an interview regarding the installation, Brown suggested his comics on the sex industry would not be sufficiently wholesome for children and families visiting the AGO. [9]

Within the gallery’s European collection, however, works such as Tissot’s *The Shop Girl*, reflect on the transactional nature of sex, representing veiled metaphors for sex work in what Hollis Clayson describes as “eroticized commerce in the Parisian shop.” [10] Couple this with a 2001 exhibition of turn-of-the-century erotic postcards entitled “Naughty Ladies,” and a picture of the acceptable domains for sexual subject matter within the AGO begins to emerge. [11] Within historical collections, where their distance from contemporary culture is maintained by novelty, these works invite contemplation. The potential for historically situated dialogue around the sex industry exists at the AGO, but Brown’s oeuvre remains represented by *Louis Riel*, if not a less controversial work, then at least one which invites controversy on established institutional terms.

A reticence to address other aspects of Brown’s oeuvre, and to nod to his comics with an edgy inclusion of the contemporary and the popular within the historical does little justice to his broader themes. Furthermore, it relies on the false assumption that his ideas and explorations of sex, politics and autobiography aren’t interlinked—to explore Brown’s work seriously might require dealing with the manifold dimensions of the artist’s work, which are political, personal, uncomfortable, honest and skillful. Nor should any discomfort with Brown’s personal politics on the AGO’s part be

avoided. Rather, curatorial power to direct this discussion towards other works in the collection could benefit both a nuanced treatment of Brown’s work and the larger thematics at the AGO.

The role of an intervention is often to de-legitimize or critique a curation that excludes. To intervene within a curation that already attempts to perform an exercise of inclusion does not necessarily peel back a layer of history to reveal a more inclusive one. Given the salon’s place as an educational exercise—a vision of how, historically, institutions have conferred art’s status, a kind of period room which plays at authenticity—curatorial steps to correct its historically-mired narratives are also steps to contemporize it, to draw it away from its own history. These moves can be important gestures, steps to fill gaps and right exclusions, but they build with the increasing potential that curators are intervening on a sort of straw-man, a convenient ficto-historical representation of the gallery’s own systems. Rather than position comics as symbolic correctives to the institution’s process or as token representations of contemporary culture, institutional curators have the privilege and resources to treat comics with seriousness, attending to their political and social nuance. As the first step in an on-going intervention, Louis Riel’s portrait fails to set the terms of the project: who or what is being intervened against, and where in the AGO are they? Where Hunter has inserted Brown, he has quickly and easily emphasized comics’ lack of belonging within the collection, but he has not brought the struggles that play out upon their pages into the gallery.

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WHERE THE TREES STOOD IN WATER

BAMBITCHELL

The following is a series of cyanotype prints by Toronto-based artist duo Bambitchell (Sharlene Bamboat and Alexis Mitchell). Each print investigates an era in the dramatic transformation of Toronto's Entertainment District through various stages of colonialization, industrialization and gentrification. Employing fragments of archival cartographic and textual material, *Where the Trees Stood in Water* positions the processes of settlement and displacement as the entangled remaking of bodies and spaces.

Please Note

Roll over each print with your cursor to view the hidden text.

Bambitchell (Sharlene Bamboat and Alexis Mitchell)

met in 2008 and have been fostering an artistic collaboration ever since. Their practice uses feminist frameworks in order to reimagine borders, historical patterns of movement and mobility, labour, migration and memory. These frameworks, often showcased through irony and a camp aesthetic, allow for an invitation to think through these ideas in nuanced and complicated ways. By working in various media (print, video, sculptural installation and performance), they explore these constantly shifting narratives through the use of images, architectures, language, sound and bodies in order to re-think and reform common understandings of immigration and colonial practices.

In 2009, they created *Inextricable*, a 5-Channel film and video installation, which attempted to queer the ways that the diaspora and nationhood are imagined by letting go of a prescriptive tie to 'home' and 'homeland'. In 2011, they created *Border Sounds*, alongside musician and audio engineer Heather Kirby. *Border Sounds* is a sound and video installation, examining figurative and territorial borders, through an immersive silent disco in an underground parking garage. The work seeks to position the participant within a performance of border crossing, both requesting and constricting movement and mobility simultaneously.

Bambitchell's most current video collaboration is a trilogy titled, *Citizen Kenney: A Love Letter in 3 Parts*. The video responds to the immigration and human rights policies of the Canadian conservative government, by addressing Jason Kenney's, ('Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism') public antics.

Bamboat and Mitchell both have independent art practices, which range in mediums but are housed mainly in video art and film. They are also both actively involved in programming and curation and are members of the Pleasure Dome Experimental Film & Video Collective in Toronto, Canada.

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Modernism, Parametricism and Contemporary Aesthetics

ALEXANDRA BUSGANG

Any notion of contemporaneity is tied to mobility and change, and inescapably the adage of modernism—to “make it new.” Now that Modernism is more than a century old, this claim to newness has become the dominant thread in postmodern and contemporary

architectural practices; as architecture critic Douglas Murphy claims, “we do not have an avant-garde developing in opposition to this.” [1] I aim to argue that architectural practices continue to exist alongside (not severed from) Modernism; that the modern paradigm has not been ditched. Despite a presumed disengagement from the past, we are forever caught in the dreams and distinctions of modernism. This position does not mean to overlook changes in technology and cultural theory, but instead suggests that these radical shifts have engaged multiple histories that ultimately exist within the same modernist structure.

Modernism greatly contributed to the consumption of novelty as a driving force behind notions of beauty. This has never been more jarring and apparent than within the move towards parametricism in contemporary architecture. This neo-architecture has formed around computer renderings that create buildings with flowing surfaces, like Zaha Hadid’s new Serpentine Sackler Gallery (2013). These bulbous, shifting monuments rely on their digital manifestations to exist in real space, as they are often towering, swooping forms that are difficult to understand from a pedestrian eyelevel. Patrik Schumacher, partner at Zaha Hadid Architects, claims that this “succeeds modernism as a new wave of systematic innovation. The style

finally closes the period of uncertainty engendered by the crisis of modernism.” [4] And yet, parametricism still operates with an extreme faith in order, surface, mobility and change. It is, of course, another attempt to forge some kind of ‘New Spirit’ or ‘New Freedom,’ but sounds very much like other ‘isms’ that contain “internal cloaked contradictions that cleverly question the very proposition being put forth—for example the neo-avant-garde’s repudiation of Modernist zeitgeist claims in favor of a new, more appropriate spirit of the present age—is nothing new.” [5] The new system therefore requires aesthetic consumption to create one’s place in the universe, thereby sealing ‘a better tomorrow’ and our endless anticipation of the future.

Architecture’s claims to a neo-avant-garde are significant to the world of contemporary art, and not only because the two occasionally overlap (as in Hadid’s Serpentine Gallery). Architecture and art inform one another as they stake their cultural and aesthetic claims. Theorist Frederick Jameson, for example, credits architectural debate in forming his arguments around postmodernism, and cultural critic Andreas Huyssen credits architecture for popularizing the very term. [6] The past century has witnessed a proliferation of styles and approaches in art and architecture including postmodernism, deconstructivism and minimalism, but these are far from successive elements within a singular, teleological history. They all exist alongside Modernism, as our addiction to novelty has remained throughout every effort to achieve a contemporary aesthetic. Each style realigns or reinterprets these histories, sometimes even oozing, through the dominant paradigm of Modernism.

This is an interactive photo essay. Search around with your mouse or finger for hotspots where your cursor changes to a pointer. Click to reveal text by the author. Hold down to see footnotes. All text boxes will hide themselves again on rollout.

Static works cited information follows on the next page.

Image:

Serpentine Sackler Gallery by Zaha Hadid opens to the public.

Photo credit:

Luke Hayes

<http://www.lukehayes.com>

Notes

- 1) Douglas Murphy, "Architecture, 'avant-gardes' and Failure." Delavsko - Punkerska Univerza, Ljubljana, Slovenija. Lecture.
- 2) Glen Hill, "Aesthetics of Architectural Consumption," in *Aesthetics of Sustainable Architecture*, ed. Sang Lee (Rotterdam: 010, 2011), 30.
- 3) Ibid.
- 4) Patrik Schumacher, "[Patrik Schumacher on Parametricism—'Let the Style Wars Begin,'](#)" *Architects' Journal*.
- 5) Bruce Thomas, "Culture, Merchandise, or Just Light Entertainment? New Architecture at the Millennium," *Journal of Architectural Education* 50.4 (1997): 257.
- 6) Reinhold Martin, "Architecture's Image Problem: Have We Ever Been Post modern?" *Grey Room* 22 (2006): 7.

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