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Art for Glob

by Richard Fung

They say to themselves,
“Let’s go spend the weekend in Québec
City, we’ll have fun, we’ll protest and
blah, blah, blah.”

—Jean Chrétien, *Le Devoir* (14 April 2001)

The future is capricious. It is stingy with its secrets. How many doomsday prophets have been left looking foolish on the day of the foretold apocalypse? I’m not advocating a move to Arizona or ordering any Kool-Aid. Still, the symptoms are pretty clear and I’ll take a chance at saying that the earth’s prognosis doesn’t look too good. A noxious cocktail of militarism and corporate greed stirred with doses of political opportunism and sundry ideological fundamentalisms seems sure to kill off the planet — unless some potent medicine comes along to neutralize the poison.

What we call corporate globalization didn’t come from nowhere; we’ve had over 500 years of colonialism and imperialism. But the system’s being distilled and there are crucial changes. Unlike classic colonialism, which

saw workers in the “metropolitan” countries benefit from the exploitation of the Third World colonies, in this new phase the desperation of Third World conditions is being used to pull the rug from under the First World working poor. And the ranks of the First World working poor are increasingly filled by Third World folks: check out the demographics of any low-wage picket line in Montreal, Winnipeg or Toronto — and these are the folks lucky enough to belong to a union. “Liberalize the economy,” clamour the corporate internationalists. “We must compete,” chant the corporate nationalists. Whether it’s the IMF or the BC Liberals, in Canada, Peru, Kenya or even the United States, poor people bear the brunt of privatization and corporatization — which leads to overturned environmental and cultural protections, the seizure and destructions of indigenous lands, and a devastated public infrastructure of health, education, housing, transportation and culture. It sometimes leads to genocide. There has never been so much disparity not only between, but also within, nations.

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Blah Blah Blah participating artists: Gisèle Gordon, Ali Kazimi, John Greyson, Charles Officer, b.h.Yael, David Best, Jody Shapiro, Lyndsay Moffat, Karma Clarke-Davis, Julie Fox, Michael Connolly, Kevin McMahon and Christopher Donaldson. Website: <http://www.urbannation.com/blah.htm>.



Video Still: l. (of) *Jences*, b.h. Yael, m. *Packin'*, John Greyson, r. *Like a Nice Rubber Mask*, Malcolm Rogge

Looks like Rosa Luxemburg might have been right about the choice between socialism and barbarism.

So what precious antidote will carry us into the future? Who are our champions in the struggle? And does art have a role? The Zapatistas in Mexico, the Nigerian women who occupy multinational petroleum plants, the school-board trustees in Tory-ruled Ontario who refuse to turn in a balanced budget: these are all resisters to the CEOs. But while local initiatives offer sparks of hope, it will take a coordinated transnational movement to erode the power of post-national capital. We've seen attempts in the protests at Seattle, Genoa and Quebec. As world political leaders meet to cook up new ways to screw their citizens, a jamboree of environmentalists, union militants, human-rights activists, peaceniks, concerned civilians and young people looking for a buzz have conferred and demonstrated on the outside, often stealing the thunder from the assembled power.

In all of these events, alternative media have played a crucial role in circulating information and analysis. But the ambitions of the Blah Blah Blah collective were quite different. Fourteen film and videomakers from Toronto responded to the 2001 Summit of the Americas in Quebec City by creating art. Each produced a short video anchored in footage taken at the April summit. These were premiered to a capacity audience in Toronto the following fall, and subsequently screened separately and together at various festivals and events. A compilation VHS cassette, *Blah Blah Blah: (re)Viewing Québec*, was assembled and is distributed through V tape (www.vtape.org), proceeds going to the Quebec Legal Defense Fund.

The collective takes its name from Chrétien's typically dismissive quote. The project was initiated by film and video artist John Greyson and actor-filmmaker Sarah Polley and producer Gisèle Gordon stepped in to coordinate logistics. There was no formal membership and the final tapes represent only some of the people who participated: I, for instance, attended many of the meetings but was unable to go to Quebec, and Sarah Polley didn't produce a Blah Blah Blah tape but instead incorporated her footage into her short film *I Shout Love* (2001).

One of the most exemplary aspects of Blah Blah Blah was that it produced community from a range of artists toward a single cause: longtime activists and people who had never attended a demonstration; documentarians and experimental artists; seasoned filmmakers and novice directors. It was also racially diverse. This is significant because diversity has so far been lacking in the self-defined anti-globalization movement. It's ironic that the depiction of anti-globalization protesters we see in the media is that of mostly middle-class, mostly white youth in Europe and North America rioting on behalf of the planet and its inhabitants — images of the 2002 Johannesburg protests were not as widely circulated. This is not to knock the act of solidarity — I for one am grateful for mostly white groups like Anti-Racist Action, which battles to keep the fascists off my neighbourhood streets. Still, the unrepresentative racial composition of both the progressive internationalists of the Canadian anti-globalization movement, and the progressive nationalists of organizations like the Council of Canadians ultimately subverts their important goals.

The art of Blah Blah Blah reflects the diversity of its makers. While demonstration footage provides a repeated and perhaps repetitive motif, the range of approaches in substance and form is striking: from an incisive deconstruction of the news industry to a sweetly subversive take by a mix-raced group of Quebec City girls; from a haunting meditation on a first encounter with a tear-gas canister to a rebel fashion file; from a harrowing account of one independent filmmaker's harassment by police to a viciously funny take-down of the summit's display of phallic power.

At the premiere screening at Toronto's Innis College Town Hall, a member of the audience raised a familiar and thorny question about art and politics: the idea of "preaching to the converted." Because the tapes focus on the protest rather than the issues requiring protest, the works in Blah Blah Blah are not primarily pedagogical. But there are different kinds of art. One of the ways the Blah Blah Blah tapes were conceptualized was somewhat like artistic home movies for the anti-globalization movement. We shouldn't underestimate this function of rallying the troops and raising morale. In the current war on Afghanistan, and the impending war on Iraq, the US entertainment industry has sent Julia Roberts, Brad Pitt and George Clooney to entertain American soldiers in Turkey, and Jennifer Lopez to warm the fervour of US troops in Germany.

To me art is like food and sex: a basic and persistent human need. Attempts to justify art by citing a social or redemptive function are not just unnecessary, but usually end up trivializing its significance. Still, what better tonic for a sickly planet than good art with good politics?