

as a place of observation and anticipation, it is awkward in regards to the wall panels.

Shirley Wiitasalo's contribution to the exhibition is five paintings, although only four are listed in the catalogue. And it is that fifth, already shown in 1981, that disturbs the consistency of portrayal that makes the notion of fiction more applicable to her work than any other in the exhibition. For Wiitasalo does not present one work that is a constructed ensemble or that is conceptually or figuratively (i.e., metaphorically) referential. These are separate paintings, each with a simple, but distinct, focal image. That fifth — a canvas-size photo-emulsion image of the Reagan assassination attempt intruding into a private living-room — ties itself too closely to a discourse on media/ideological imposition. The rest of the paintings, presumed originally to stand together, are more sly and subtly shifting than analytical in their ideological suggestions; not pointed as a semiotic, but seductive in their simplicity as oil paintings. A nebulous seductiveness, in a sense, is the subject of these 'house and garden' paintings where subjectivity and irony mingle in projections, reflections and distortions. Within each of these paintings, figures float like clouds, non-verbal balloons or 'thought-forms'. In *Untitled* (1982), a pink house floats in the middle of a bifurcated yellow and turquoise field reflecting its status trappings as an imitation manor or estate house complete with quivering price in the black pool of its imaginary. In *Beautiful Garden* (1981), the dream turns sour: in the 'balloon' above one filigree garden chair we can make out through highlights one figure beating another, while similarly above the facing chair, a man servilely kneels behind a passing officer. The gouaches that accompany these images in the catalogue show Wiitasalo's pursuit of these moments of inner (and domestic) distortions of the imaginary, whether moments lingering in fantasy or disturbed in the sudden violence of paranoia. Her sophisticated means display the naive fictions within, not the critique of representations outside.

PHILIP MONK

## SHELAGH ALEXANDER

YYZ, Toronto  
May 10 — 29

A single photograph indexes the present within the formal limits of its frame. It presents that (formal) moment as a static, wordless mirror, heedless of duration or decay, of affect or statement. Sometimes that presence is diverted or delayed by language, as in a caption beneath a newspaper photograph, for instance, but words hardly ever encroach upon the image except in the slick images of advertising or its exact counterpart, semiotic critique. And if the photograph lends itself to narrative, it is through the moving image of film, or sequentially as the pages of a photo-book, never as a still image.

In the first part of Shelagh Alexander's *Hero*, a narrative, or more properly, a fable, is the means to move the viewer through the compilation and conflagration of imagery. Alexander calls this three part series of fourteen 30" x 40" panels "compilation photographs". In this process, selected images from different negatives are systematically printed on the photographic paper through a registration system that uses as many as twenty rubilith stencils per print. Text and drawing are treated to the same photographic production. Making their own space, and giving each of the three parts its own character, the images overlap, passing from panel to panel and composing horizontal sequences in the first two parts and a vertical progression in the third.

The impression of visual jumble in Part One is dispersed by the narrative which cues action to general figures of photographic reference and by an overall figurative composition — the drawn outline of the head of the "Beast". This part opens in an urban hell, specific to the viewer's own urban context, but apocalyptic. "Caught in the head-



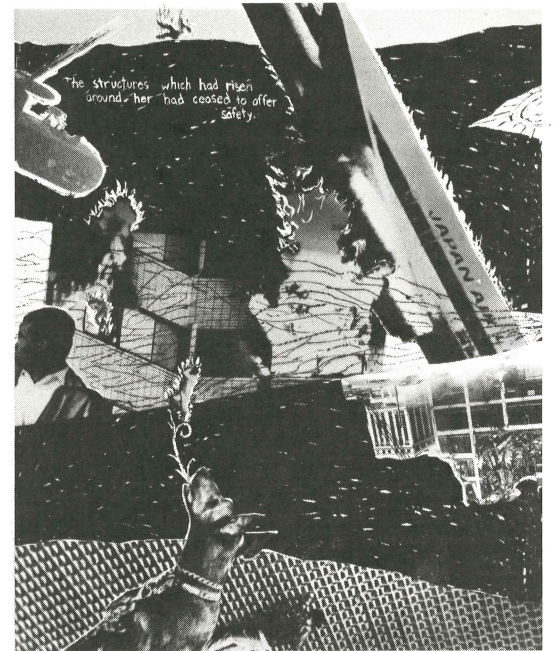
Shelagh Alexander, *Hero* — Part 1, 1982, compilation photographs, 5 panels 76 x 102 cm (second and third panels)

lights of a swiftly approaching car", the female protagonist is also destined for the mouth of the Beast as it is coincident with the triangular beam thrown by the headlights of the car. The mouth of the Beast is that consuming city: into the tenement and apartment-toothed mouth of the Beast, flaming bodies, crashing airplanes, crazed horses and burning dogs tumble.

From a common reality that has already been made figurative, in Part Two we are transported to a fabulous realm signalled by the "exotic" desert and classical ruins — a *mélange* of primitive religion and Dionysiac madness (spiral-dazed eyes of rearing horses) and Disneyland castles "built on the back of misery and death". Having seen the Beast for the first time and out of disgust for all those affected by it, she raises a kingdom "from the dust of destruction, built by those infected by the beast and kept in darkness beneath a palace." And so the horizontal orders these panels — the palace above the workers, and pyramids above a tunnel — with subterranean madness and slavery signifying the seeds of a class war.

By the end of this part, the series has become a narrative of the quest for individual wisdom, based on the allegory of the archetypal hero's quest and trial, as the "King", her father, casts his daughter into the "deepest hole" to learn wisdom for her human abuses. Here, in the ascending final panels, the princess is instructed by the Beast: "The mirror is the key, look into it and you will discover that it is merely a shallow grave. Look beyond it, and you will find a broad road which shall carry you far further than you have ever gone before." She discovers that road that sets her free as a sympathy and solidarity with the workers who built it beneath her palace.

This is not the happy end and simple narrative wish-fulfilment, for the headlights she discovers on this road return her to those in Part One. Part One now functions as the fourth part of the series, changing the interpretation of that narrative and offering a bifurcated ethical choice. This return is a hinge: having seen the Beast for the first time she chooses either its ways as the narrative at first implied in building her palace on the back of misery and death or she combats it ("I refuse to turn away again"). This complex return and bifurcation "saves" this fable from its naivety. The work operates as a multilevel narrative space with its context and temporal shifts from the commonplace to the fantastic/heroic and back again, returning the allegorical to action in everyday life: the circular structure returns us to the urban reality we know. The work can be divided into story and discourse levels in terms of both its narrative and photographic construction. The story level is of the order of the fable and of the found



or taken "to order" photographs which do not illustrate the text as much as create a ground for its interpretation. The discourse level is the structure of the narrative and the unique creation of photographic space specific to the techniques of compilation. Finally, the content finds its photographic expression which is a critique at the same time. The shallow grave of the mirror is formal photography; the road, photography's narrative path. What at first appeared a charming tale, in the risk of naivety, ends in being a complex expression and courageous statement.

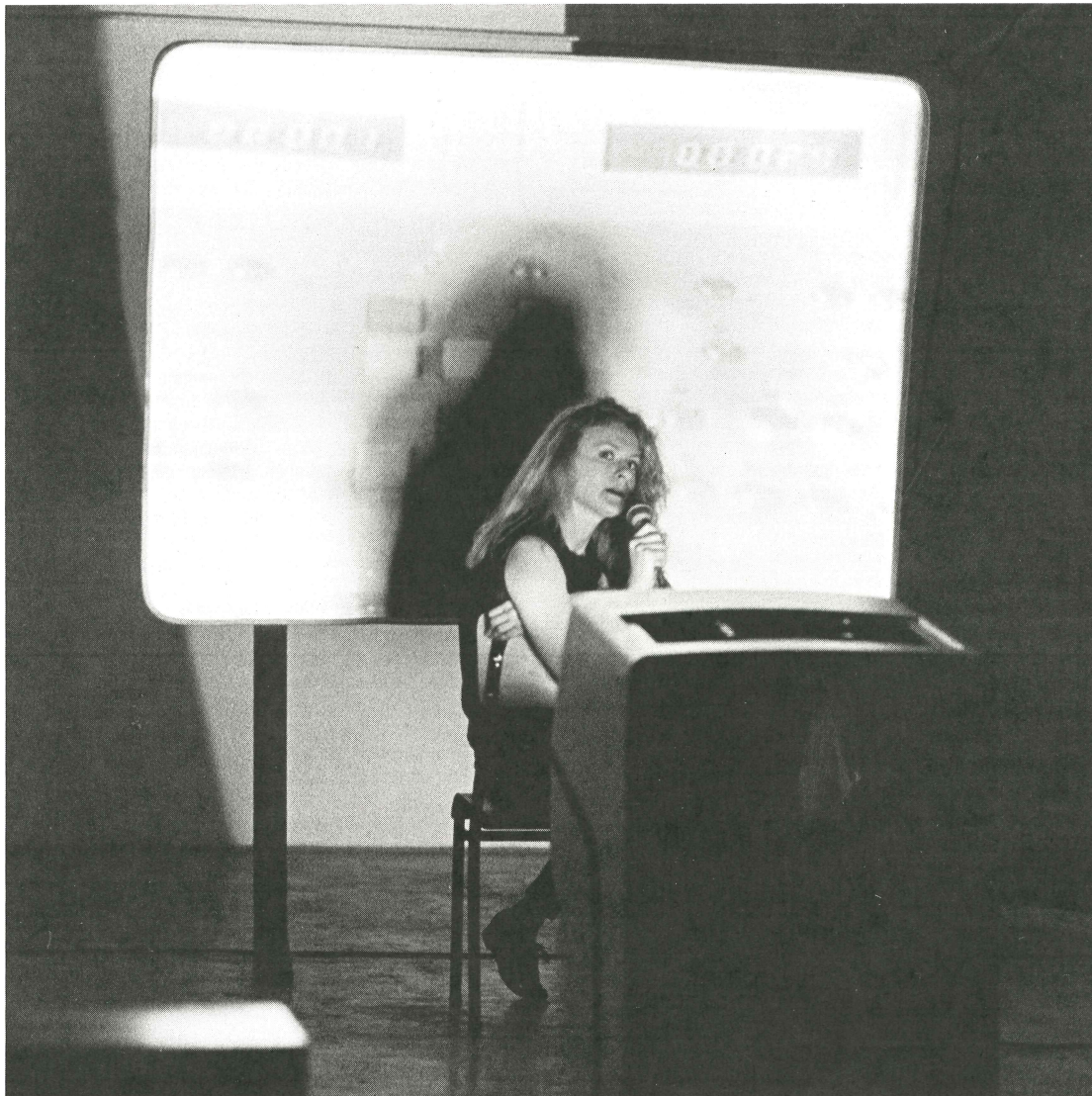
PHILIP MONK

## AGIT-PROP

International Performance Art Series 1982  
Mercer Union, Toronto  
July 19 — August 9

It was unfortunate to give the performances in this international series the name (or the pretence of the name) *Agit-Prop* because now we must call the bluff of art and consider it primarily in those terms. Simply stated, the works are not and cannot be agitational propaganda under the formal conditions of presentation that the performances accept. *Agit-Prop* historically was a means to propagate the Bolshevik revolution among the proletariat and an illiterate peasantry after the 1917 October Revolution in Russia. For a short period, artists abandoned their studios and their *work* took form for the masses in theatre, street demonstration, film, posters, and the rolling billboards of agit-trains and ships. The social conditions of revolutionary Russia and failed pre-revolutionary Germany (pre-1933) that urgently pressed these forms and leftist artists into service, however, do not exist today in a period of victorious capitalism. If the revolutionary Russian poet and agit-propagandist Vladimir Maiakovsky could say that "The revolution of substance — Socialism, Anarchism — is unthinkable without the revolution of form — Futurism", today, the reverse — formal innovation — does not lead to politics or revolution. For today, if we had to find the formal equivalents to a pervasive capitalism (what capitalism allows and what legitimates it), we could only name semiotics and the "critical" art work that bases itself on this analysis.

The title of this series directs attention to politics. Without this title, we could not say that these performances were



Elizabeth Chitty, *History, Colour T.V. & You* photo: David Progosh

any different in nature than any other performances. Does that make all performance art political? For this series then, it becomes more a question of what is political than what is performance here. A question immediately arises: What is political in political art? But then the title refers us back to when art was political during the historical period of agit-prop, to how those artists proceeded and to the writings that they left to teach us their practice.

In these current performances what is named, who is addressed and who is spoken for? What class is the work directed to, and how does the audience's highly specialized competence affect the works' effects? If these questions were addressed, instead of a commitment to an art discourse and art spaces or an adherence to "critical" art strategies, then these performances might have found the terms basic to agit-prop. Missing from the performances, and fundamental to agit-prop, were a clear and observable sense of political purpose and a relation to the audience understood through the direction of the works' formal effects.

These means need not be reductionist or crude. After all, the practitioners and theoreticians of a political art were such formal innovators as Brecht and Eisenstein. So much of the form of contemporary performance owes to the examples of these two artists, if not in a direct affiliation of influence: montage, reportage, alienation effects, separation of all the elements of a production, introduction of projected texts and films into performance, etc. Brecht and Eisenstein may have differed in technique — an alienation effect in Brecht and an ordering and regulation of shock effects for Eisenstein — but they were united in the purpose, didactic effect and class basis of their art. Brecht could ask "What was the good of a constructivist

stage if it was socially unconstructive?" ("On Experimental Theatre", 1939) because he believed "Only a new purpose can lead to a new art. The new purpose is called paedagogics" ("On Form and Subject-Matter", 1929). In his 1925 manifesto, "The Method of Making Workers Films", Eisenstein brought the issues of purpose and effect together. His "class approach" introduced "a specific purpose for the work" and "a choice of stimulants." After "making a correct appraisal of the class inevitability of their nature," the choice examined the reaction to effects that were specific to a certain class and the accessibility of that class to the stimulants.

When we come to the performances in this series, it is a different matter. Generally, we probably could consider most of the artists leftist and anti-corporate media. It is presumed all performance/critical/semiotic art is. The opening performance, Bruce Barber's *Vital Speech/Agit-Lecture*, exemplified some of the automatic presumptions of this approach, presumptions that negatively reproduce the content of their critique in the performance's relation to its audience. In the notes to his performance Barber states:

This work will be presented in the form of an *agitational* lecture which should reverse the usual lecture form where the fetishization of knowledge is *a priori* in the construction and maintenance of passive and alienated consumption... The intention of the "Agit-lecture" is not to fetishize knowledge or package it for consumption but to allow the audience of potential consumers to become active participants in the critical construction of *their* knowledge... The intention is *not* to produce propaganda, but the more urgent need at this time which is to demystify and deconstruct forms of contemporary propaganda contained in forms of popular culture, advertising, newspaper and newsmagazines as

well as those examples of "live" political rhetoric that we are subjected to on a daily basis.

We can take the intention expressed here, if not the form of presentation, to be the concerns of much of the other performance work. (But this intention is already a form and a relation).

Barber chose to "deconstruct" the advocacy advertising of arms manufacturer United Technologies in *Atlantic* magazine in comparison to their hard and software military advertising in *Air Force Magazine*. His performance was a demonstration of this deconstruction through blowing up parts of text in slides, rhetorically reading the written texts and comparing them to editorial copy in *Atlantic*. Among the many problems, is first, Barber did not find a new form of presentation as he claimed — it was fetishized in another way. Moreover, this "agit-lecture" has chosen to remain in the critical mode, secondary to that analyzed, rather than finding the forms for an active propagandizing. (In collaboration, Brecht could "treat organization as a major element of our artistic work. This was possible because the work as a whole was political." And Eisenstein could both make an analysis and produce a positive effect on the audience.) Secondly, in claiming a conspiracy between United Technologies, advertising and politics, Barber failed to realize what seems obvious: that this advertising intention is never deep. The editorial-like advertisements are too clumsy ever to be taken or accepted as editorial copy of or by any magazine. Perhaps Barber should have studied the reception of these advertisements rather than automatically have presumed a naive response on the part of its original readers and the present performance audience. Barber may wish to avoid authority and fetishization in his speech, but they are part of the very method he chooses — deconstruction and semiotic critique. (Ironically, this new form of commitment has done more than anything to reconcile modernist techniques to the sign processes of late capitalism.)

Perhaps it is unfair to concentrate on *Agit-Lecture* and so judge the others since it was hardly a performance in their terms. If I do, it is because intention there has not been formalized; it remains a clear strategy that is usually obscured in the "critical", formal presentation of media content in performance itself.

Not all the performances used the same critical devices to make their own critiques. In *Every step could be the wrong to take*, Marcel Odenbach wished to oppose the behavioural norms of media by presenting something else. That opposition was performance. (Still, the dominant critique is implicit in the statement associating television "with a mode of appearance as an expression of socio-political consciousness and conduct.") Odenbach's actions in his elegant formal set-up did not achieve the concentration, intensity and presence that he wished in counterbalancing a tape of the slick North American evening soap opera *Dallas* with his own performance. The rhythm, pacing and climax of Odenbach's performance could not match what he calls the "brutal banality" of *Dallas*, but which in turn judged his performance. Mediation overwhelmed presence in this performance, for good or bad.

Some presentations simply did not work as politics or performance. Sonia Know's *Moving On* was a pretentious procession of cliched images passing between performance and live video, a performance throwback more reminiscent of a disconnected notebook.

If these artists attempt to make their performances critical, then Elizabeth Chitty's *History, Colour T.V. & You* attempts a critique that is entertaining. For Chitty, "History" is a metaphor for communications: "Colour T.V." an all inclusive communications environment no different from "History"; and seduction that means by which we as the "You" come into relation to the performer and the audio-visual technology of the performance and, by implication, the media. The performer herself is brought into relation with the various technologies through a montage effect and a conversational mode that is not quite given or explained to the audience. The montage/collage of the title is repeated in presentation where it accumulates as a device rather than condensing a critique. In presenting so

much information as recorded or live images, definitions, music and popular songs, in the end what does this montage performance, that is entertaining and well-constructed, actually present to us? Does it perhaps accommodate us too readily to what it wishes to criticize? Placing and reproducing popular/commercial culture in the format of a performance (under the aegis of a critical, therefore elitist, connoisseurship) seduces us to the performance's own entertainment, not to arriving at our own critique.

We can talk of the effects and the effectiveness of these performances, whether they were successful as performance or successful as politics. Each, however, has its own notion of what politics is, which, in its own terms, saves it from accepting any traditional view of politics or assuming it as an act. For instance, there were elements of Stuart Brisley's *The Georgiana Collection* which were highly effective as performance but left no room for the audience to act in any political sense. Brisley's cadenced invocation of desolate urban waste and human misery through a repetitious text conflated existential and sociologized descriptions of vagrancy, biological and medicalized descriptions of ecological decay and urban blight with the breakdown of psychological separation of inside and outside. The literary qualities of this text in conjunction with slide images of waste culled from this area of North-West London were more effective than Brisley's own actions, the burnt refuse at the entrance and the breaking of glass, all of which seemed too representational. By the end of the performance, mainly through the repetitions and inversions of this text, the audience was convoluted into the position of subject/object of this voyeurism, left in general unease, dislocated from action.

Martha Rosler in *Watchwords of the Eighties* was the only artist who attempted to be politically effective in terms of direct reference to a contemporary political reality. The direct reference for this American artist was the Right taking power in the United States. Its context was conveyed through slides of newspaper articles of American policy and Reaganite elegance alternating with documentary images of Central American revolution and anti-nuclear marches. These were played off rap music and by the end of the performance indigenous Central and South American folk music. Carrying a fake oversized ghetto-blaster, Rosler scrawled the "watchwords" over the images; at first as a street-kid graffitiist and then as an urban guerilla sloganist: Reaganite "quality" became socialist "equality". This language change (taking words over) coincided with the change from ghetto to guerilla, but this symbolic transformation (its implied effectivity) was no more than an inventory of what we already know. Outside of the performance it is hard for us to translate her activeness into more than an activist stance.

In criticizing these performances under the heading *Agit-Prop*, I do not propose what is truly political in political art. Preliminary to any possible political import to work, I think we must examine the legitimating structures of our own particular discourses and practices. In an unpublished fragment (translated in John Willett's edition, *Brecht on Theatre*), Brecht indicated the first steps. Under the heading "representation of sentences in a new encyclopaedia", in which we might substitute "performance" for "sentence", Brecht wrote:

1. Who is the sentence of use to?
2. Who does it claim to be of use to?
3. What does it call for?
4. What practical action corresponds to it?
5. What sort of sentences result from it? What sort of sentences support it?
6. In what situation is it spoken? By whom?

(*Agit-Prop* was organized by the Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff and took place there between July 9 - 25, 1982. The two performances that did not travel to Toronto were Marcella Bienvenu, *Arrival* and Ulrike Rosenbach, *Meeting with Eve and Adam*).

PHILIP MONK

## WILLIAM S. BROWN

Mercer Union, Toronto  
June 30 — July 17

From an array of materials and bodily actions William S. Brown synthesized a performance in *Steeplechase: An Obstacle Race* which was intended to be, abstractly speaking, an art object. From his art object and my own intellectual bias and my own subjective experience I could synthesize in this review, abstractly speaking, a critical object. This is because I cannot speak of Brown's art object as if it were separate from my experience of it or separate from my own intention to create a body of critical work comparable to an artist's *oeuvre*. This means that a review seeming to be a verbal representation of an artist's work and a reflection upon it may not be such at all, for always in some degree the writer concocts a separate intellectualization, a conceptualization of a work in which the writer has partaken equally with the artist: a writer's abstraction that is an amalgam of the writer's ideas and the artist's offering. William S. Brown, in his knickers and knee-pads, just might be projected onto a level of abstraction that presents his performance not so much as his art object but as a critical object controlled by the writer.

What would happen if this critical object were to be confined to a particular conceptual framework? If I were to do this, there would be no report of how *Steeplechase* transpired, in its own context, as an art object observed. But in disclosing the conceptual framework by which any works might be analyzed, maybe *Steeplechase* the art object would be revealed — even though all the athletic paraphernalia, the tiny flags, the stilts, the cinderblock shoes, each red, white and green device and Brown himself, nimble and sweating, would have to be assembled in theory as tidily as the tiny maquettes Brown arranged on the gallery shelf.

The central construct in the particular theory from which



William S. Brown, *Steeplechase* at Mercer Union  
photo: Peter MacCallum

my critical method arises is the idea of a work of art as an *amenable object*, a construct derived from the psychoanalytic discoveries of D.W. Winnicott, who, in his book *Playing and Reality*, wrote about the psychological impulses that lead to culture production. This perspective is a psychologically-biased one in which subjective phenomena are of primary importance and art history is secondary. Psychologically, the amenable object functions as a semi-illusory, half-real device with which a person defines and re-defines the external, and his relationship to it. (It cannot possibly be true that there are already enough ways to distinguish where subjectivity leaves off and the objective begins.) The fundamental characteristic of the amenable object, is that it mediates in the perception and re-synthesis of something external to the viewer, but which nevertheless effects the viewer's subjective being. If *Steeplechase* is amenable, we will not leave it alone when we look at it, but follow Brown's progress up the thin green steps, swooping through the air, crunching glass squares, through all his cartoon tribulations, waiting for the cue to throw our own questions and conclusions into the contest he has constructed.

Winnicott's hypotheses lend themselves, among other things, to an emphasis upon the role of ambiguity in regard to the interpretability of a work. It seems that cultural production always acknowledges an essential ambiguity and this ambiguity ensures that the amenable object will incorporate the viewer's subjectivity into its own presence. It is this latter aspect that is most relevant to *Steeplechase*, because it is a four-dimensional metaphor — a lone athlete's mastery of absurd obstacles produced and enacted so precisely that it has no ambiguity.

Ambiguity of form and of function seems to induce the viewer to project into a work, and the notions or wishes projected could be the beginning of an interpretation, though not the entirety of it. Could there be an end to the list of memories from Parcheesi, superstars, Calder, crackerjack prices, report cards, hits, nearmisses, hops-cotch, harlequins, hub-bubs and hundreds of other sporting moments with which to confront *Steeplechase*, as if it were like a metal detector, telling us if we're on to something or not?

But in the structures or gestures of the work, there is no evidence that Brown perceives any ambiguous aspects to the winning of his race. *Steeplechase* does not seem to have made his skepticism visible, only his enthusiasm. Cheery, meticulously constructed, aesthetically coherent, devotedly performed, this performance did not re-define, what a race is, or what winning is but only repeated how we can win whatever race we are in. With no ambiguous object amenable to interpretation, the viewers could only be side-line spectators.

JEANNE RANDOLPH