

which would deny the object an art status. If, Snow postulated, we moved art outside its typical environment, outside of our experience patterns, would it still be art? Although Snow was not among the first to make these observations, his work of the early 1960s does stand as an instance of the desire to transgress the restrictive boundaries of modernism. Long before Keith Haring, Snow was placing his W.W. trademark in the subways and on the street; attempting to break down our "art perception way of looking," our drive toward order in the perception of art. In doing so Snow suggests that the purpose of art is to reveal the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. Even a cursory glance at the exhibition reveals Snow's delight in making objects unfamiliar and discontinuous, in breaking down our relationship to things. The foldages, the canvas constructions such as *Gone* (1963) or *Interior* (1963), and the mixed media constructions such as *Morningside-Heights* (1965) or *Sleeve* (1965), all increase the difficulty and length of perception, all act on "our art perception way of looking." But what is seriously lacking in this exhibition is a sympathetic documentation of Snow's "lost" art; his subway art, furniture, curtains, magazines, books; and not only these "art objects" but the cultural acts that accompanied them, i.e. the placement of the work in a cultural space (as adversed to a museum space), on construction sites, the door of an automobile, in the crowds at Expo 67. The irony of Snow's statement lies in the fact that everything in this exhibition has been brought back into an ordered way of seeing. These are things/events which might have placed the art in question, and instigated an "erotics of the New."

Yet once again the position of *Projection* comes into play. In this work Snow, in a formal sense, completely transgresses the traditional concept of the print and film-still, but more importantly alters our perception of the W.W. series. So that works that originally were intended to encompass a cultural act and an anti-museum act now (in relation to *Projection*) reveal themselves as a sexual act; and once again "our art perception way of looking" is called into question, but no longer in merely a formal sense.

I have suggested that the works in this exhibition are about formal freeplay, about the erotics of the New and the Self, about the restrictive nature of exhibitions and retrospectives, and sexuality — but it seems that they are also (or perhaps wholly) about something else entirely. They are concerned with what is unsaid and undone, with those absences which form the deep structure of meaning. In Snow's work it isn't just that "PRESENT [art] FUCKS PAST [art]," or that after the series had ended critics, curators and viewers reduced its potential for meaning to formalist freeplay. It has more to do with our desire to use art as a means of denying our expectations and experience patterns so that we may experience the erotics of the New. But sooner or later in an effort to establish meaning for the work we constantly re-structure and re-order the art into a signifying whole, so that we may give it some representational status. In *Projection* Snow suggests that art will always be used as an "EXCUSE. ENDORSEMENT. RATIONALIZATION. DEFENSE." of itself, it is in its own right a desire to order meaning. Whether in the realm of performance, video, installation, multi-media, word art, or whatever, we are faced with object/events that cannot deconstruct themselves, only the viewer can do this, and more often than not there is nothing there to initiate that desire. We constantly deny the *absence* that structures, and seek meaning only in the *presence*.

BRUCE GRENVILLE

#### NOTES

1. In the coming months this exhibition will travel to the Dalhousie Art Gallery, Halifax (May 31 - July 1, 1984); the London Regional Gallery, London (July 15 - August 26, 1984); the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria (September 13 - October 21, 1984); and the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (November 3, 1984 - January 13, 1985)



**undo you**

Barbara Kruger, *We will undo you.*

## THE REVOLUTIONARY POWER OF WOMEN'S LAUGHTER

A.R.C., Toronto  
February 4-28

*The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* came to Toronto preceded by two misrepresentations. One was an article in *Vanguard* magazine by a New York critic. The other was the title itself. Both led to disappointment on seeing the exhibition, but we need only deal with the second since it is integral to the exhibition, although not necessarily serving it or the artists: Mike Glier, Ilona Granet, Jenny Holzer, Mary Kelly, Barbara Kruger and Nancy Spero.

An immediate reaction to the exhibition was that there was no laughter — in the work or on the part of the audience. There was some depicted "shouting," but no laughter. In what sense is laughter taken in the title? And in what respect is this "revolutionary power" power or revolutionary? Since this is a thesis exhibition and the works are taken as examples, the theoretical framework as set out by the curator Jo-Anna Isaak in her accompanying text has first to be stated.

This framework is French theory of the Text based on Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva and others, synthesized and popularized by Roland Barthes. "Text" is broadly conceived as a signifying practice in general: thus the language works in the exhibition (Holzer, Kelly), the photo-textual works (Kruger), and the more "traditional" painting forms (Glier, Granet and Spero) all fall under its purview. If "the speaking subject is subjected to and constructed by language,"<sup>1</sup> we can take language here also to be syntax of images or the relation between an image and a text. "Subjected to and constructed by" can mean subjected to the image-prac-

tice of mass-production, for instance advertising that constructs a subject and a look, as well as the construction of codes of representation in artistic practices and conventions. These codes, conventions and representations are part of the symbolic order which is constituted by the "Law of the Father," an order that represses "what is termed variously the discourse of the Other, the desire in language, or what for the French feminist theorists of female 'difference' is the female." All the same, logically, these are represented within and between the interstices of the text.

Not only is the subject constructed in totality, reality is as well. Reality is taken as a text, as what is already written, a structure of "domination in this form of society (call it the paternal, the phallic, the symbolic)." How does one confront that order? "To accept the text, to remain within the symbolic function..., is to be subject of others' discourse — hence tributary of a universal law... To reject the text is to find oneself alien, silent or exposed to the psychosis that appears on the signifying borders of our culture. The only alternative is to seek the *pleasure* of the text, either by playing upon the codes already in place, or by finding passages through them, in a word the French recently have reactivated in English — *jouissance*. It is the potential of this *jouissance* that the exhibition 'The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter' intends to explore... The exhibition constitutes a reading of the text which is no longer consumption, but play." But perhaps play is only the ruse of consumption. It remains to be seen whether "play" is the only alternative, or whether "pleasure" itself and its attendant critical practice have been determined in a specific moment in late capitalism, where activity can be reduced to its simulation ("play") in textuality.

"Reality," "text" and "play" are three terms we should interrogate; but given the review format, we can con-

centrate on "play," which all the same should not be thought as the mediating term between "text" and "reality." To maintain some relation to activity, or critical effectivity (but the limits of this effectivity are blurred in this theory), we have to keep some distinction between "text" and "reality," which is where "representation" enters, in order that the "revolution" does not remain textual. And what if we should think that the work in this exhibition is more "serious" than this "play"? Contrary to Isaak, it seems that the work does deal with consumption, not play, but not a passive consumption, rather a readdressing of the conditions of consumption.

Thus the work in this exhibition does not "constitute a reading of the text" but addresses an audience. The work is only partly directed to other texts, to "intertextuality," only insofar as some may use the conventions and strategies of advertising. The work is addressed to an audience, and in some cases an institutional setting. (Although that audience may be recuperated into a textual theory as no more than the text: a "tissue of quotations.") Behind that address, which is an intention and not merely a (textual) strategy, is an announcement, which brings the work into relation with its institutional setting. This announcement, besides the address to the viewer, is directed to power, but by assuming power for itself, power is not avoided through play.

If the code attributes identity and "reality," it can be played against through "the fundamental discoveries of modern linguistics and psychoanalysis — discoveries made possible by the opening of the gap between signifier and signified [which] had a radical effect on the understanding of the operations of signifying systems." This has had the double effect of, on the one hand, displaying the mechanisms whereby a signifying system, which is really in a state of continuous process or production, loses its transparency and immediacy, and on the other hand, opening the space for a manipulation of the code "through play, jouissance, laughter. 'A code cannot be destroyed, only played off' (Barthes)."

Are these the constructions and conditions by which these works address us in the gallery? What are the codes Glier, Granet, Holzer, Kelly, Kruger and Spero play off? It seems that Glier, Granet and Spero play off and reinforce pretty traditional graphic conventions: there is a play only in the content as a simple reversal of value. For instance Mike Glier's banal photo-lithographs, the caricatures in *White Male Power*, by the only male in the exhibition, are juxtaposed to the heroicizing of hitherto passively represented subjects and elevation of "craft" in his two *Shouting Women*, painted robustly on stretched fabric. Similarly Ilona Granet simply presents an image in *Bums/Bombs* rhetorically equating authority and weaponry. This literally is sign painting according to iconic conventions, not a sign system nor the disruption of a code or the conditions of address. Nancy Spero's scrolls of multiply hand-stamped figures overlaying a range of representations of women are *images* of "the jouissance of the female body" not "an alternative inscription." "Difference" is there by declaration, as in Isaak's text: thus the function of the Hélène Cixous quotation in Spero's *Let the Priests Tremble* ("Let the priests tremble, we are going to show them our sexts! Too bad for them if they fall apart discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one.") The running, dancing figures in *To the Revolution* are images calling forth the code, which is the title as well, in the same manner as a cliché, signifying "revolution," "liberation."

The more formal, "theoretical" work in the exhibition is that by Holzer, Kelly and Kruger. Significantly, it is language and photographic work in these cases, work that is more open to manipulating commercial codes and representations; and women are not so much represented in these works as they are positioned. These are positions of construction and address, which are inseparable.

Isaak signals Mary Kelly's well-known and well-travelled *Post-Partum Document* as the historical and theoretical basis for the exhibition. It is a significant work, and the one that probably most satisfies the criteria of Isaak's essay for the construction of sexual difference. In Kelly's piece, this construction takes place through the socialization process of the child, which is that of the mother as well. It is here that Kelly makes her intervention into psychoanalytical theory on the part of the mother's desire and the possibility of female fetishism. On the other hand, the work intervenes into artistic practice — what is thought of as a "natural" women's practice in art — and into the institutional museum apparatus. She says "the framing, for example, parodies a familiar type of museum display insofar as it allows my archaeology of everyday life to slip unannounced into the great hall and ask impertinent questions of its keepers," although the parodying of codes here is not so apparent as the intervention of its content.

The last of the *Documents*, Part VI, was shown at A.R.C.: "Pre-writing, alphabet, exergue and diary," but without the notes that usually seem to append its exhibition. The piece closes the socialization process with the double loss to the mother through the child's full entry into the symbolic order through language and schooling. This is displayed by the three registers of the child's script and her own writing on fake Rosetta Stones.

It is significant that Kelly does not use images of herself or her child in the work intending rather to display femininity and motherhood not as natural and pre-given entities but as social constructions and representations of sexual difference within specific discourses. For her part, Barbara Kruger takes advantage of the conditions but not the images of advertising. The photo-stat blowups of found, but staged, photographs and her own scripted texts have the look of advertising. But their own power exceeds playing off advertising's codes. While Kruger uses the indexical shifter "you" to great effect, there is no doubt who is addressed by that "you" in its repetition: "You are seduced by the sex appeal of the inorganic"; "You thrive on mistaken identity"; "You have searched and destroyed"; "Memory is your image of perfection." It is not an intertextual effect that the shifter would lend support to, but a direct address to its viewers who are positioned differently according to their sex.

While Kruger plays off the directness of advertising, Jenny Holzer plays on the formal strengths of art strategies. We have seen the *Truisms* and *Inflammatory Essays* already in Toronto as part of an A Space series where the *Essays* were placed in the street week by week. At A.R.C. fifteen were placed in a Carl Andre checkerboard on the wall. In theory, identity is subverted here, not by repetition, but by contradiction of the ensemble of statements. In reality, the statements are contradicted by their formal presentation and their inability to subvert gallery codes and contexts even when they are placed in the street.

Both Holzer and Kruger address the viewer within an abstract, generalized field, like advertising, the conditions under which we are commonly addressed, and in the case of Kruger's work, women are socially constructed. Mary Kelly's work, on the other hand, deals with common but specific social and economic constraints. The most theoretical, it is also the most personal, and consequently the most satisfying work in the exhibition in its struggle between the two.

#### PHILIP MONK

#### NOTE

1. All unacknowledged quotations are from Jo-Anna Isaak's essay.

## ROLAND BRENNER BILL WOODROW

Mercer Union, Toronto  
February 14 - March 3

An important component to this show lies in the relationship that is presented by the coupling of Woodrow and Brenner. This is significant on two accounts. Firstly, both Woodrow and Brenner share a common "point of origin" in that they both spent their formative years under the tutelage of the St. Martins School of Art in England. (Woodrow is said to have been a student of Brenner's at one point.) Secondly, both artists have been (or still are) on the leading "edge" of British sculpture at different points in time. Brenner in the sixties as part of the "New Generation" lead by Tucker, King and Caro, along with Ainsly, Louw, etc. Woodrow on the other hand falls into the contemporary classification of sculpture re-directing the focus back to its "objectness" but with certain important modifications which sets him apart from many of his peers, such as Kapoor, Ople and even Cragg.

The significance of this coupling resides in Brenner's shift from the kind of work that he was previously concerned with. A type of work which became synonymous with the constructive principles of welded steel sculpture. A preoccupation dominated by a concern for spatial relations, where the works' unity was determined by a part to whole relationship. The emphasis here lies in the process and materials. What is most significant in comparison to the dominant mode of production referred to as Modernist is that Brenner and Woodrow's work stresses a tension imposed through the presentation of sculpture as presence and as discourse. The concern in the former is for how sculpture takes its place simultaneously as an event and literal object, in the world where it is totally present. In the latter the concern is for how sculpture functions as representation within a discourse of objects and images in a broader context of social meaning. This already points to an important shift in the production of sculpture from that set out previously by modernist tendencies. These tendencies can be summarized as a concern for a mutual juxtaposition of shapes (i.e. material, I beams, girders, etc.) so that each element has a mutual significance to the whole, through an opposition of contrast, similarity and so on. This then constitutes the meaning of the work.

By contrast, Woodrow's work is radically different. It is pictorial, rather than stressing the importance of volumes in space. Many of his works are aligned and propped against the wall, as in *Picnic*, or attached to it, suspended like a picture as in *Portrait of a Friend* and the *Chrome Scissors*. However, it is not only the placement of the works and their emphasis on the frontal experience that prompts the reference to the pictorial, but also the emphasis placed on the images in the work, which recombine with the material from which they were constructed to provide a different kind of reading circulating as they do around the name given to the material as object, car hood, and the image made out of it. For example a parrot and machine pistol as images constructed out of the object car hood to form the work *Parrot Fashion*. A certain interdependence between the object and its image makes for some of the strongest works in the show. *Parrot Fashion* (not illustrated) is perhaps the best example.

Woodrow's method of fabrication is a leader to the understanding of his work. The term appropriation is often used to describe his methodology. I would prefer to offer the term "montage," which at the same time is applicable to Brenner's work. Montage is a process which includes a lexical field consisting of the terms "assemble," "build," "join," "unite," "add," "combine," "link," and "organize." While this takes into account the works' fabrication, it does not examine the complex relationship that is assembled through the combination of images and material.