

MATERIAL FICTIONS/ IDEOLOGICAL FACTS

For the exhibition *Material Fictions* at the 49th Parallel, New York critic Ronald Jones has contributed an essay entitled "Cool Canadians." Curated by France Morin for the 49th Parallel and the University Art Gallery of the State University of New York at Binghamton, the exhibition consists of the work of Vikky Alexander, Alan Belcher, Jennifer Bolande, Jack Goldstein, General Idea and Ken Lum. As I have not seen the exhibition, I do not wish to criticize the work by these artists, but rather address the essay by Jones which was invited as a commentary on the exhibition.

In her short curatorial statement, France Morin suggests that "owing to their emergence from a Canadian cultural context, with all that it implies, we would expect to see a difference in their work from that of their counterparts in other countries. But, do we detect here a national sensibility or an international language?" She goes on to state that this work is not especially typical of Canadian art, and that there exist two schools of thought about Canadian art: "One, a revisionist approach [which presumably this exhibition engages] in which Canadian art is examined within an international context, and a more nationalistic treatment, with an emphasis on specificity (more strictly speaking, what is 'Canadian' in Canadian art)." Ronald Jones proceeds to demonstrate the reactionary nature of the latter.

Perhaps the essential question to ask is what agenda is being served by this set-up, and why is an American critic called upon to deliver the blow? Only the Director of the 49th Parallel as the curator of this exhibition can answer. Further, why is an argument against Canadian art being made by work that is not "especially typical," but which is taken as the model for what Canadian art should be? Who and what are being served here? And why is the argument made in such weighted, even simplistic terms?

We can unravel the simplicity of Ronald Jones' argument: national culture is bad because supposedly, and surprisingly, it serves late capitalism; and the art of this exhibition is good because "we recognize it all" — it looks just like New York art.

Jones argues that "cultural difference is becoming more difficult to discern"; that a nationalist endeavor "arises by recognizing cultural differences"; and to attempt to discern and value that difference is reactionary: "The claim that a culture is also a national culture, has always been reactionary to the extent that it properly means cultural self-determination." Fools that we are to wish or attempt to determine our own culture, or to have a more complex notion of nationalism that extends and attends to the local, rather than assuming that "late capitalism" determines everything everywhere the same.

"A bit of art history" (and no theory or politics) is brought in to justify this argument — a very little bit: Nazi art, Futurism, German neo-expressionism, and American formalism. "These thoughts are set forth to provide a useful backdrop for *Material Fictions*, because it is as though this exhibition is a test site for Canada's contem-

porary culture." Never mind that France Morin claims that this "work is not especially typical of the larger Canadian scene." Never mind that Canadian art is to be defined from a centre of power outside the country. Instead we find what Canadian culture is and what it should be, as prescribed by this exhibition and Ronald Jones: "*Material Fictions* is about the fakery of contemporary reality, that is illuminated by Jean Baudrillard's notion of 'hyperreality'; and that the exhibition "may be viewed as the confirmation that 'hyperreality' is the *solution* to national cultures." The work in the exhibition is "hyperreal" and a critique of it at the same time. It maintains its critical stance by revealing that "hyperreality," the loss of cultural difference, has ruthlessly distilled nationalism." To think and act upon a national culture are merely the symptoms of an unacknowledged loss of difference. To conceive of difference is merely to fuel its disappearance.

Ironically, to continue to believe in some vestige of national culture, in something that really amounts to the determination of, or at least interest in, one's own history "is to willingly serve the long term interests of the late capitalist program (sic) to surreptitiously intensify its own centralized authority while simulating the free play of culture and imagination." To assert a difference is only to be complicit with the late capitalist levelling of difference, a levelling that "distills difference to offer a finite set of standardized products to a global market." But is this not what the art of *Material Fictions* offers under its critical veneer? Instead, "these artists are the critical respondents to their time," who "force the hand of the withering credibility of national cultures to betray it as symptomatic of the loss of difference at large."

If national cultures are merely local symptoms of "the normalization of the economic, the social, the political and the artistic" in late capitalism, Jones sees the solution to be the radical embracing of late capitalism as a refusal of difference. This is the ambiguity of both his notions of late capitalism and difference. "The question as to whether cultural difference can persist into the last quarter of this century" is resoundingly answered in the negative by Jones. This inability to see difference, only to recognize the same and to attempt to reproduce it everywhere, is a strategy of power disseminated from a centre, a form of cultural imperialism that takes its strategy from late capitalism and serves it.¹ Why is this levelling of difference, then, attributed to something that tries to assert difference?²

Why is it, or rather why should we believe "that each attempt to define a national culture, or even a national style by this exhibition proves unsatisfactory and unconvincing is precisely at the heart of the matter"? Should we let *this* art be the proof? And should this art prove unconvincing? Certainly Jones' arguments prove unsatisfactory as other than an apology when we are offered such a simple notion of nationalism and not given a clear demonstration of the role of national or local cultures in the eradication of difference. Why is it that "in the end, it is precisely because these artists are incapable of expressing something 'uniquely Canadian' that tells us more about the state of Canadian culture than if they could"? Maybe instead it only tells us about some of these artists.

"The artists in this exhibition center us within a culture

to which Canadians can have no exclusive claims." Perhaps it is possible that we do not want to lay claim to this culture, in believing that other possibilities exist. (Baudrillard does not have the corner and New York artists the cartel on what defines our reality.) According to Ronald Jones, the tautological reflection of this art proves neither difference nor cultures exist. But the proof is only in the tautology and not in any argument that Jones presents. He is blinded to anything that is different and it is that blindness in his writing that closes the possibility of difference.

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NOTES

1. Jones states that "national cultures have been used as instruments of exclusion." Yet he speaks from a city and culture that operate from an unspoken nationalism disguised as internationalism. It is unspoken precisely because its language is power. One can once again sense the climate of exclusion in New York. The days of doors open to Europe (but never to Canada) are over; and the doors are being closed partly by the art that finds its reflection in the work exhibited here.
2. This inability to recognize difference repeats itself in a footnote where Jones states "[Baudrillard] corroborates the same universalization which Mandel associates with late capitalism. Within the intersection of ideas created by Mandel and Baudrillard, would naturally be Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's thoughts from 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well as Jean-François Lyotard's *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*." This "intersection" only confirms what the pre-"hyperreal" Baudrillard wrote in *L'Échange symbolique et la mort* on the exchangeability of theories, which here has become a mere signposting of writers' names, and it denies not only the difference between these writers but also the differences that each of these writers value, for instance, Lyotard on the micrological, the local and "the strength of the weak." Much the same can be said for the Adorno of *Negative Dialectics* and *Minima Moralia*.

ERRATA

Parachute n° 48: Dans l'éditorial à la p. 4, col. de droite, dernier par., 5^e li., il aurait fallu lire: «En 1963, Adorno 'revisitait' cette notion...», et non pas en 1977, qui est l'année de parution du recueil d'essais *KulturKritik und Gesellschaft* chez Suhrkamp Verlag. Dans l'article *La Colonne burennique*, p. 10, 3^e col., 3^e par., 15^e li., il aurait fallu lire: «...la presse de droite comme le *Figaro*...»; p. 11, 2^e col., 4^e par., 12^e li.: «Le jour, on aperçoit à peine les tranchées, on les entend. La nuit, on voit les tranchées et on ne voit plus les cylindres.» Dans le commentaire sur le *Festival de théâtre des Amériques 1987*, p. 57, 1^{ère} col., 3^e par., il aurait fallu lire: «...ainsi le théâtre aurait été plus volontiers autoréflexif, transculturel ou performatif au Nord, alors qu'au Sud, il fut plutôt délibératoire, identitaire ou inchoatif».