

## Postscript 21

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**Not Sheep: New Urban Enclosures and Commons** [Exhibition]

2006

I want to point briefly to two works presented in *Not Sheep: New Urban Enclosures and Commons*: Clint Burnham's *Be Rich or Move to Suburbia* and Klub Zwei's *My Eyes Come From Brasil*. I choose these pieces not because the artists parallel the positions of the show's organizers – Clint Burnham being a Vancouver writer, educator, and poet, similar to Jeff Derksen; and Klub Zwei [Simone Bader and Jo Schmeiser] being a collaborative pair of artists from Austria, much like Sabine Bitter and Helmet Weber, who with Derksen make up the collective Urban Subjects [US]. Nor do I think that these pieces should stand in for the exhibition as a whole. With close to fifty artists, theorists, architects, and poets contributing work from post-socialist cities and other urban centres in Eastern and Western Europe, North, South, and Latin America, no two works should be expected to bear that burden. But both pieces do represent, in concise ways, a poetics I see Urban Subjects' project advocating, a poetics which seems to have its roots in an experience of astonishment. And by poetics I don't want to refer simply to the literary, but rather to an ethics of making.

The poetics of astonishment recognizes the challenge of addressing a dominant, neoliberal discourse that has strategically cloaked itself in the rhetoric of freedom, a term which, since Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev's Kitchen Debate in 1959, has come to refer more to a free market, and less to the democracy of the *agora*. It struggles with a space in which an economic common sense – think Mike Harris's "Common Sense Revolution" in Ontario, think Margaret Thatcher's "There Is No Alternative," think Bill Clinton's "It's the Economy, Stupid" – has come to replace a sense of the commons.

So when Clint Burnham submits a found text / object of a Dutch antacid / anti-flatulent, which carries the brand name Rennie, and when he titles it *Be Rich or Move to Suburbia, Rotterdam-Vancouver 2006*, the reference becomes obvious to anyone who has heard of the condo king of Vancouver, Bob Rennie, head of Rennie Marketing Systems, the firm responsible for the packaging of the Woodward's development. And the idea of a Rennie brand antacid becomes curious to anyone who has recently passed by the abandoned Woodward's building, seen the posters carrying the slogan "Be Bold or Move to Suburbia," and felt a certain turning in their stomachs, or felt their heart burn. Whose pain does Rennie soothe? Do developers get nervous on the Downtown Eastside? Is that why people who waited in line for up to twenty-four hours to purchase a share in Vancouver's gentrifying history did so at the Shaw Tower in Coal Harbour, wrangled by "event" staff with jackets emblazoned with the same slogan?

I want to be fair: let's say that Bob Rennie, for all his visibility and success, will for a long time to come function synecdochally for the gradual expulsion of the working class from the city of Vancouver. He will function this way especially within an arts community whose placation he cannot expect to come included with the work he collects. But we need to remind ourselves that he is only part of a whole, however catchy his name may be. His firm has nothing to do with the Henderson Group's España towers, just two blocks south of the Woodward's site, whose marketing campaign is equally sickening. And he is not responsible for a spineless city council who seems incapable of standing up to developers when it comes to social housing. Or a provincial government whose Safe Streets legislation – it hurts my stomach just thinking about it – deals only with the imagined threat that visible poverty poses to tourist dollars. Thanks, voters! But let's also refuse to be naïve, or even nice. Let's say that when there are those for whom urban boldness is characterized by real estate speculation over policy, by investment over co-operation, that we have a problem, and it helps if that problem has brand recognition.

So when Klub Zwei submits a series of posters for *Not Sheep* from their *Work on / in the Public, 2000 / 2001*, posters which document conversations between the artists and the Autonomous Center for Migrant Women [MAIZ] in Vienna, and which document them in six different languages, the reference becomes clear to anyone who has felt suspicious of the dominant media's distribution of information. And although Klub Zwei has a local concern in this piece – a specific group of women trying to intervene in and expose the cultural stupor-structure of Vienna – the gesture of translation allows it to function on a (CanWest) global scale, so that events in Austria in 2000 / 2001 match up topographically with Vancouver in 2006, and let's not kid ourselves, 2007, 8, 9, and beyond.

I want to be clear, so I'll let the dominant speak for itself (from the Retort collective's recent book, *Afflicted Powers*, quoting the *New York Times*):

Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, at that time the senior military spokesman in Iraq, was asked on April 11, 2004 – as the first major offensive against the occupation was unfolding – what he would tell Iraqis in the face of televised images 'of Americans and coalition soldiers killing innocent civilians.' 'Change the channel,' was his reply. 'Change the channel to a legitimate, authoritative, honest news station.' (187)

If the poetics of astonishment has a posture, or an expression, it stands with arms folded in frozen exasperation, as if it were receiving horrible news about someone it once knew but has lost track of. It breathes in sharply and exhales slowly, with wide unfocused eyes and a weighted pause. But what makes it a poetics, and not simply a condition, is a decision to act, a rescuing of resolution from despair, to steal a phrase from Retort, who takes it from Milton. It's the poetics Mark Nowak describes in his contribution to *Not Sheep, Notes Towards an Anti-Capitalist Poetics II*, a poetics that stands counter to the spatial poetics of the authors of IMF or WTO economic policies – documents which all too obviously contain a specific ethics of making. It aims for collective activity: in Nowak's terms, borrowed from Adrienne Rich, "to form and inform."

But the poetics of astonishment should be careful not to decay into a poetics of complaint. The work produced can neither be cathartic nor palliative, nor can it be satisfied with its contribution to a wider discourse. It must imagine and implement a *bricolage* beyond the rootless, postmodern meaning of the word, back to its context in Paris in 1871, where the term described a method of constructing barricades against the forces of Versailles out of any and all available material: a poetics of and through resistance. But unlike the Communards, who attacked and toppled the symbolic Vendôme Column while leaving Notre Dame Cathedral and the Bank of France untouched, let's not forget where the money lives.

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