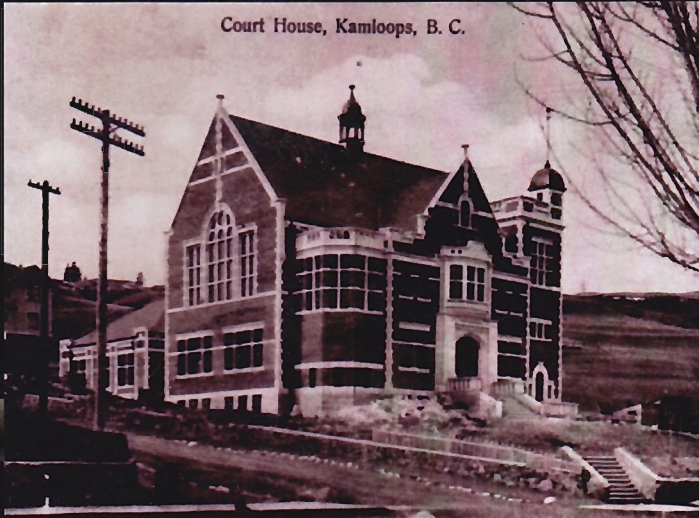


COURT HOUSE

VERNACULAR MODES OF INQUIRY:
ARTISTS' PROJECTS
AND DISCUSSIONS

NOVEMBER 25 - 27, 2005



Old Kamloops Court House Hostel
Kamloops, British Columbia

Court House Foreword

Court House brings together four artists' projects (by Panya Clark Espinal, David Hoffos, Ernie Kroeger, and Donald Lawrence) in the context of presentations and discussions involving participants coming from such disciplines as Cultural Theory, English and Philosophy. Collectively, this research group is exploring the notion of Vernacular Modes of Artistic Inquiry: the manner in which an individual's (or a group's) localized manners of expression come to be recognized against some larger cultural or political context.

If, as Glen Lowry contends in his review of *PhotoGraphic Encounters* (an exhibition guest curated by myself and W.F. Garrett-Petts at the Kamloops Art Gallery in 2002), the vernacular is articulated at the moment of performance—is always in flux—then we might say, as many in this group or artists and thinkers works seems to suggest, that questions of Illusion and Reality, and of Home and the Homely are actively linked to the contingencies of Remembering and Forgetting, and the flows of time they involve.

Thus, the Court House project has emerged as a means of further exploring these ideas in response to the tangible presence of the artists' projects in a particular space. Many of these ideas developed in the various aspects of this project intersect Celeste Olalquiaga's consideration of nineteenth. century visual culture in *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience*. Her interests in artifice and cultures of display are worked through a questioning of how past events are recalled through memory all the while distinguishing between nostalgia and melancholy, in which the former is a longing for an unrealizable past and the latter is a meaningful redeeming of the past for the present.

These artists' projects have been created for this venue and, interestingly, each in some respect plays off some idea of water. An interest in water flows throughout *The Artificial Kingdom* and is present also in earlier works by each of the artists. The projects' varied utilization of imagery involving water provides a basis for questioning the relationship between personally invested experience and the broader cultural associations which such imagery often invokes. In his essay Home Thoughts, which has been excerpted throughout this pamphlet, Bruce Baugh takes up some of this discussion in response to what the artists have said of their installations.

Donald Lawrence

Kamloops, BC – November, 2005

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Home thoughts

Home is where the heart is
Home is so remote
Home is some emotion
Sticking in my throat
Let's go to your place

Lena Lovich

I. There's No Place Like Home

Home, we are told, is something good and desirable. It's good to "feel at home"; restaurants still (implausibly) advertise "home cooking." For a time, Home was even the brand name of an oil and gas company. Home is a place of comfort and shelter, a place where we "belong," the place we come from ("my home town") and to which we long to go back, our place of origin, the site of our deepest and earliest memories. Like Dorothy, we are all taught that if we ever go looking for our heart's desire, we shouldn't look any further than our own back yard: "There's no place like home."

What if, to reverse the cliché, home is like no place? It is not a place anyone has ever lived, but an ideal place, a no-place, a u-topia. At a certain level, we sense the falsity of the images of home concocted by Norman Rockwell's pictures, Disney movies, and Frank Capra films like *It's a Wonderful Life*—not to mention the architectural pornography of the myriad "house and home" magazines, whose "homes" resemble real homes about as much as the "women" depicted in *Playboy* resemble real women. And yet because these images teach us that this fictional "home" is our heart's desire, we believe in this

myth. We feel deprived of the comfort of a home that never was, estranged from our real home by an imaginary ideal of what home should be. It is as if our homes are haunted by an ideal double: Home itself, the very model of hominess, the essence of Home. "Home" is more ghost, more revenant, than real; the "home" we seek in our homes is never found, but hovers on the margins, an unseen presence, an uncanny double of the streets and houses where we live. It is no wonder that the movies and other media that purvey images of Home are imbued with nostalgia: the home we long for is an ideal past that never was, an irrecoverable loss because, contrary to the cliché, you can lose what you never had (but you can never get it back). To go home at all is to return to that never-never-land, to go home again; and this time the cliché is right: you can't go home again.

As early as his 1920 *Theory of the Novel*, the Hungarian critic and philosopher Goerg Lukács reflected on the "transcendental homelessness" of modern life. In his major work, *Being and Time* (1927), the German philosopher Martin Heidegger traced the not-at-home-ness or uncanniness (*Unheimlichkeit*) of existence to the dominance in modern life of the impersonal authority of the anonymous "One" or "They" (*das Man*), the rule of "public opinion" (which is no one's in particular and everyone's in general) and other impersonal norms governing conduct and values. When "they" determine what "home" is and what it should be, it is no wonder that human existence is "not at home" (*nicht zu Hause*). But, Heidegger adds, we are so entranced by the endless activities and sheer busy-ness required to achieve some approximation of this illusory "home" that we scarcely notice our homelessness or the uncanny, not-at-homeness of our actual lives, which have been scripted by the They's impersonal societal norms rather than authored by the

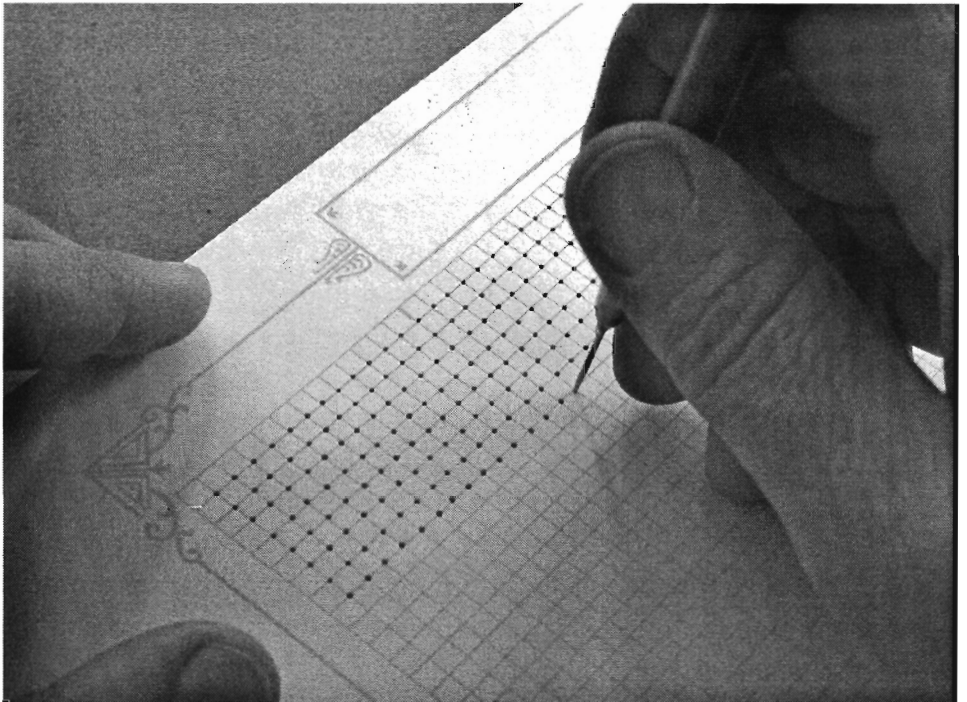
individuals living them. Only in privileged moments of anxiety does the “nothing” looming behind our scripted lives and manufactured desires break through the surface, and fill us with uneasiness.

Uneasiness, uncanniness, doubleness, the uneasiness that lies just below the surface: these haunt the works gathered together in this exhibition. Each work unsettles, and confronts us with the realization that things are not as they seem—that “home” may not be where we think it is, and that it is something other than we’d imagined. Beneath the surface, monsters lurk, or worse: nothing. Upon the moving surface of the deceptively clear waters, images play, whether cultural clichés or personal, photographic memories. In all, there is a tension between surface and depth, between what is revealed and what is hidden, between the clear stream of consciousness and Lethe’s river of forgetfulness, between the coercive and anonymous norms inhabiting our images and desires and our actual experience. Not that these works break through illusions to arrive at the truth; the disillusionment is that even when we discard some of the illusions foisted on us by the culture at large, our notion of what is “real” is based on other illusions.

II. Ideal and Real, Bauhaus and Our House: Clark Espinal

This tension between ideal and experience, between one modern illusion and another, between past and present, runs through Panya Clark Espinal’s work. The entertainment industry, which promotes the consumption of unnecessary and useless products and images in the relentless and yet strangely “tranquilizing” (Heidegger) round of earning and buying that constitutes so much of suburban and urban life, is confronted with the purity and simplicity of the toys and activities devised by Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), the inventor of the

kindergarten. As the inventor of the kindergarten as a place for young children to develop their cognitive and creative abilities through play, Froebel is part of the nineteenth-century movement which created childhood as a separate and relatively privileged stage of life. Without this realm of childhood as a place of play—and hence a place of the consumption of leisure goods such as playthings, toys and entertainment—there would be no frenetic consumerism of the sort promoted by Disney and Toys ‘R’ Us.



But Froebel himself was a modernist-purist: the toys in his kindergarten used simple geometrical forms (likes sticks and blocks) and required active manipulation in a program of “self-active learning,” rather than the passive sensorial bombardment from the Disney factory; the aim of his activities for children was “the production of the beautiful, not only by [the child’s] own activity, but by his own invention” (Wiebe 1892).

Modernist architects such as Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright passed through Froebel-inspired kindergartens, where they learned to love the austere purity of form; Clark Espinal’s parents, both modernist architects, imparted this same love to her. In Clark Espinal’s Froebel-inspired work, we witness a “return” to purity and simplicity, which is also a “return” to an imagined innocence of childhood. Clark Espinal’s work, consisting of images created by making pin-holes or pricks on a grid, is based on an exercise Froebel devised to develop the creative and artist sensibilities of children through “education or play” and which Froebel and his followers called “gifts,” because through them the child could be given (back) to herself. The book from which this “gift” is taken is entitled *Paradise of Childhood*: a paradise lost, of course, a past that is inaccessible and irrecoverable because it was never really present—at every moment, even of childhood, it is the lost innocence of just a moment ago or “once upon a time,” a dreamed or imagined past. In effect, then, Clark Espinal’s work confronts the consumerist present with an ideal past: the past that should have been, and that perhaps will be in a time to come, an untimely past which can perhaps free us from the real past’s constraints and for a new future in which work and play coincide. The ideal and imagined past is also a lost possibility that stands before us as utopian future which haunts the present.

Even more unsettling is the realization that the passive consumerism of modern suburbia's actual present is perfectly "at home" in the utopian future of modernism: the frantic busyness of consumerist activity dwells comfortably in the many suburban houses that owe so much to Wright and Gropius, and to their teacher, Froebel. This is not just a fact of the culture we live in; it is the invasion of Clark Espinal's own living room, through the agency of her children's consumption, a role made possible, ironically, by the movement that freed children from work and for "learning" and leisure—the movement in which Froebel played such a key role. Froebel's ideal paradise is the "fallen" consumerist world. In Clark Espinal's images, this reversibility of values becomes visible: the "front" of the image created by pinpricks also has its "negative" reverse side of raised bumps, creating the same pattern in reverse; the dark pinpoint can become points of light against dark ground through a change in the lighting. Front is back, dark is light, positive is negative, the past's dreamed-of and ideal future is the real present. Of course this is incongruous, and that's also why it's both humorous and unsettling.

Clark Espinal's work thereby attempts to use this incongruity to wrest her life-narrative from the one dominated by the anonymous They—a move toward the personal, or toward the authentic, in Heidegger's words, and also an instance of Froebel's thesis that ideas which do not originate through one's own experience and mental activity "are simply the consent of the mind to the ideas of others." Yet it is not (as is often the case in Heidegger-inspired art) a "heroic" move, which challenges the everyday from a higher place (a lost tradition, an ideal). It is mock-heroic, and challenges the everyday with the everyday: one facet of the everyday (modernist purism) with another (hand-crafted images such as a kindergartner could make); the "universal" vernacular of consumer culture and high modernism with

a personal vernacular constructed from personally selected bits and pieces of the universal. Such bricolage is not sublime or tragic irony, but humour: the presentation of an incongruity surpassed through laughter (however nervous).

The bricolage of pure form and consumerist waste is most evident in Clark Espinal's use of materials. A video image of water running down a drain, in a vortex or whirlpool, where the circular drain at the bottom of the tub sometimes seems to rise to the surface of the water which is about to flow down through it, becomes, through a further reversal from positive to negative such that the dark spots and stains on the tub's surface become tiny white points of light, the spiral galaxy of stars. From water down the drain—the descent into the maelstrom—comes a spiralling to “the starry heaven” of night that fills the soul with wonder. All of these beautiful forms and sublime movements are played out on a silver screen made of the foil inner liners of tetrapack Rice Dream containers which have been cut open and sewn together, the very antithesis of the sublimity of spiral galaxies and maelstroms. The shock of the incongruity between the ideal and the everyday is disquieting and humorous, like seeing a philosopher gazing at the heavens tumble into a ditch (or a bathtub): the indignity of such a fall is at odds with the dignity of thought that led to it.