E C A L P F O T C O

WALTERCIO CALDAS

PANYA CLARK

CLAUDIA CUESTA

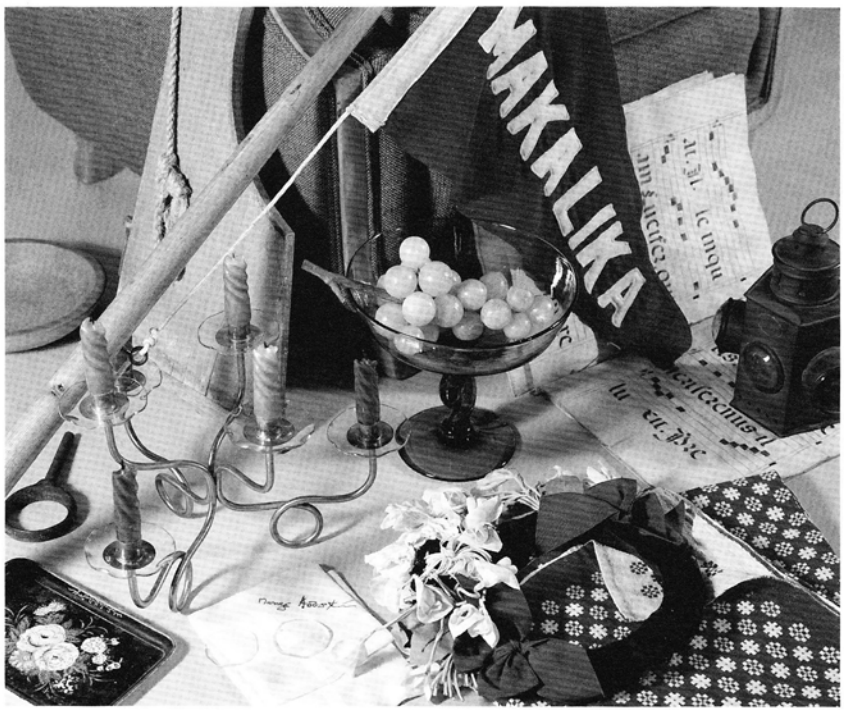
EUGENIO DITTBORN

STAN DOUGLAS

DOUG HALL

CHIE MATSUI

PANYA CLARK



STAGING POSSESSIONS THE OTHER'S AND GRANDMOTHER'S

Charlotte Townsend-Gault

IN PANYA CLARK'S *Research & Discovery* copies of the *National Geographic* flaunt their characteristic rich, shiny photographs alongside replicas of the artefacts photographed. In *Re Appearances,* paintings by Paraskeva Clark, the artist's grandmother, are set alongside some of the actual objects painted. Panya Clark insists that the initial, simple, and continuing thrill of these juxtapositions, the "gut-felt excitement" when she recognized the "real" objects of her grandmother's representations, is central to her work.

What *Research & Discovery* and *Re Appearances* seem to point to, even to replicate, is that moment of awe, the *frisson* lurking in the ordinariness of the taken-for-granted. Her work is both absolutely pragmatic ("I have always grounded my work in what is actually in front of my eyes") and absolutely mysterious. What is "actually" there, how people construct what is "in front of" their eyes, is not and never has been a simple matter. Clark contributes to this mystery by needling away at the intimate link between representation and the desire to possess the represented.

What is "real" about a representation? What exactly, in the "real" world, is a painting or a photograph? The relationship between the real and the represented has exercised western philosophy at least since Aristotle. Representation has been newly topical at least since Duchamp's contribution to the conundrum of *where* exactly the "art" resides in art. It was widely canvassed by conceptual art and, more recently, in art practices and theories that examine the framing, positioning, and reception of art objects for the construction of their "art-ness."

Clark's emphasis on the essential simplicity of her initial excitement seems to distance her work from one of the shaping tenets of the discourse. This tenet

page 31:

RE APPEARANCES 1993 (detail of objects used in still-life paintings by Paraskeva Clark.)

is expressed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu when he says that any act of perception is a deciphering operation requiring "a more or less complex code which has been more or less completely mastered." Whether or not there can be socially naive perceptual *frisson*, it would be disingenuous to see Panya Clark's works, in their interrogation of her grandmother's paintings and *National Geographic*'s photography, as anything other than firmly embedded within that part of contemporary art that aspires to carry on this debate. It is a debate that continues a tradition of self-scrutiny of western modes of two-dimensional representation. It follows various lines of enquiry—historical, anthropological, philosophical—and considers mechanical reproduction and the mass media, the objects of art and their referents. In fact, Clark's work has all the embeddedness one would expect from an artist who counts Liz Magor and Ian Carr-Harris as her important influences both at the Ontario College of Art and since.

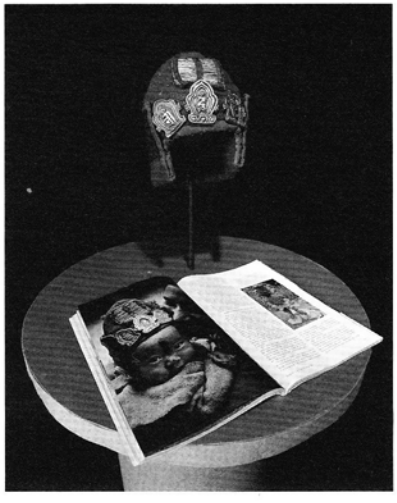
The Canadian context for what might be called "grandparent studies" in the visual arts has been set by many works, including: Janice Gurney's work based on the similarities and differences seen in the photographic likenesses of her grandmother and herself; Rebecca Belmore's *For my cocom* (1989), which incorporates her grandmother's voice in a small wrapped and decorated box that seems to hold something of the woman's presence; and Sara Diamond's *Patternity* (1991), which reconstructs the role her father's memories have on her picture of herself. There are closely associated literary works like bell hooks' *Yearning* and Trinh Minh-ha's *When The Moon Waxes Red* and direct scrutiny of magazine pages can be traced back to Ian Wallace's *Magazine Piece* (1971), in which the viewer is assaulted by a grid of pages from *Seventeen* that question the veracity of the medium.

Other artists who have worked from or on original works of art include Jeff Wall (Manet's *Bar at the Folies Bergères)*, Evergon (Caravaggio), and Garry Neill Kennedy (*Canadian Contemporary Collection* at the Art Gallery of Ontario). Among artists concerned with the institutional and domestic politics at work in the positioning of art are Paul Wong and Robert Houle. These artists also draw attention to the theatrical nature of the presentation of art—art as mise-en-scène—as do Barbara Lounder, Stan Douglas, and Daniel Dion.

As for the peculiar interface between art objects and the objects of art, instances abound. Last year the National Gallery of Canada mounted a small exhibition around Benjamin West's *The Death of Wolfe* (1770), which included objects on loan from the Museum of Mankind in London, England: moccasins, the bandolier bag and other items worn by the Iroquois figure who kneels at the lower left. Presumably these real things reinforce both the authenticity of the painting and the authenticity of themselves, as well as ensuring the painting's status as historical document—one of the grandest in Canada's history. In the film *Tous les matins du monde*, a central motif was a painting—a Chardinesque recreation of the *nature morte* on a table in the musician's study. It showed the wafer crumbled by the apparition of his dead wife; a painting which captured this could perhaps assuage his terrible longing for her. In *Field work*, a piece

which has achieved some notoriety in the politics of appropriation in Canada, Liz Magor juxtaposed the artefacts she made "in the manner" of the Indians when living with a group of friends on the West Coast in her late teens alongside photographs from that time.

The plurality of meanings implied by such a complex pedigree can be ordered somewhat by thinking of Clark's work within the terms of two different models: simulation and the spectacle, which, as Johanna Drucker has pointed out, are more useful when separated than when conflated. Certain features of *Research & Discovery*, for instance, confirm Jean Baudrillard's claim that image and reality, far from being separate, are one and the same thing. For Baudrillard, images have no referent beyond themselves and if we think they do we are indulging in fantasy. While Baudrillard has hardly gone uncriticized, there can be no doubt that his articulation of these views has coincided with a preoccupation with simulation and authenticity in the visual arts and elsewhere. The view that late capitalist society can be characterized by a separation between image and reality, informed by the nostalgia of a post-industrial society for a pre-industrial elsewhere, was first clearly expressed by Guy Debord. Coining the phrase "the society of the spectacle," Debord brought a historical dimension to the incurable longings of the metropolitan populations.



RESEARCH & DISCOVERY 1988

magazines, table, chair, painted shelf, display stands, and mixed-media (Detail: Child's hat)

To outline in this way some of the terms of a discourse is not to imply that it can account for any given work. To label the epiphany that lead to *Re Appearances* as, say, an instance of the Kantian sublime, would be to consign its realization in this work to the waste-bin of over-determinism. In reality, it is a reminder that there is still something to be wondered at, including how it is that accounting for it still doesn't explain it away.

The *National Geographic*, which has been publishing since 1888, must have done more than any other print medium to popularize the mysteries of nature and culture. Clark points out that for its mass audience—predominantly middle class, white, North American—the *National Geographic* functions as a kind of museum. It is the quintessential journal on things not ourselves—posited on what 'we' will find different, or shocking, or surprising. She also recognizes that the journal itself is an artefact of her personal culture.

Some critics now consider *National Geographic* an irredeemably colonizing enterprise, manipulating the mechanical means of production in order to select, reduce, digest, and essentially falsify so called informa-

tion. Clark's use of the *National Geographic*, however, does not imply such a critique, being unconcerned with the politics of its representation or their history. Her maternal grandfather subscribed and copies were always lying around his home which Panya visited regularly. It is from his collection that she borrows. These are family possessions, not any old back numbers. She acknowledges, even celebrates, the journal as something that has always confronted her, been one of her own framing devices. As such, it framed her own longing for the objects shown. Always fascinated by the artefacts in its photographs, she had deplored their distance, their absence from her own life.

PARASKEVA AND PHILIP CLARK'S HOME c. 1982

In an attempt to compensate for this absence, Clark created *Research & Discovery*. She invested her simulacra/replicas with an extraordinary quality of authentic falsity (or false authenticity). The installation itself tried to replicate some of the journal's object qualities: the rich glossiness of its photography; its identifying border, the classical framing and controlling device that is transferred from the front cover of the magazine to the room; and the room itself, approximates the proportions of the magazine.

But in the end, her take on the magazine, her copies, were not the real thing. "I felt I was left empty handed. What had I seen? What had I experienced?" So she is critical, but her criticism of *National Geographic* goes more like this: "It's not real. It's a frustration. We're drawn to it and then left high and dry. . . . This arbitrary provision of beautiful stuff and fascinating cultures leaves me distraught."

Debord wrote in 1967 in *Society of the Spectacle*, "everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation." The success of representation lies in its ability to fascinate while compounding the problem it articulates. Its "failure," if that is the right word, is that it can only be a spectacle of a spectacle. Clark came to think of her own production as trying vainly to recapture the directly lived. Her question "What are we about?" came down to the incontrovertible fact that the possessions shown in the magazine are not her possessions. No amount of reproduction, whether in a photograph or an ingenious replica, can mediate this distinction.

It was at this point that Clark realized she *did* possess some objects in a sense that was not arbitrary, and that there might be a way to overcome the paradox of absence and permanence. The result was *Re Appearances*, which struggles against simulation and insists on its own referents by making a spectacle of a set of representations and their referents. Seeing *Re Appearances* together with *Research & Discovery* in an exhibition allows the spectator to appreciate how the longing that focuses on objects is both assuaged and intensified.

RESEARCH & DISCOVERY 1988

magazines, table, chair, painted shelf, display stands, and mixed-media

facing page: Overall view

this page: Detail: toy boat

37 PANYA CLARK

In the little houses the tenant people sifted their belongings and the belongings of their fathers and their grandfathers. Picked over their possessions for their journey to the west. . . . The men were ruthless because the past had been spoiled, but the women knew how the past would cry to them in the coming days. . . . When everything that could be sold was sold . . . still there [were] piles of possessions. . . .

The women sat among the doomed things, turning them over and looking past them and back. This book. My father had it. He liked a book. . . . Got his name in it. And his pipe—still smells rank. . . .

Think we could get this china dog in? Aunt Sadie bought it from the St. Louis Fair. See? Wrote right on it. . . . Here's a letter my brother wrote the day before he died. . . . No, there isn't room. How can we live without our lives? How will we know it's us without our past?

John Steinbeck
The Grapes of Wrath

Unlike Steinbeck's sharecroppers, Clark herself did not have to make these choices. The decisions about which of her paternal grandmother's possessions survived had already been made by the serendipitous circumstances of family life: breakage, loss, changing tastes, moving houses. Nor did Clark have to verify their authenticity, the paintings did that for her. However, Steinbeck and Clark were clearly thinking of objects in very similar ways. The discovery, or rather the recognition, of some of her grandmother's possessions in her own life—a wooden bowl, a bunch of alabaster grapes, a tablecloth—fulfilled the kind of needs that had been created by the *National Geographic* images. Her things, her life, her culture, her grandmother: the things were a route to knowing her grandmother as an artist.

Paraskeva Clark was born in 1898 in St. Petersburg and received her art education in Russia without being directly affected by the revolutionary movements around her. She had hoped to become an actress and her work reflects a lifelong interest in the theatrical. Paraskeva lived in France after the death of her first husband until 1931, when she came to Canada with Philip Clark, whom she had met in Paris. (Their son, Clive, is Panya's father.) Although retaining her identity as a Russian émigré, she soon became a significant figure in Toronto's art milieu and contributed to its debates around landscape and the social purpose of art. She was also prominent in movements that connected Canada to the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War, to the inhabitants' suffering during the siege of Leningrad and, through the War Artist's Programme, to Canada's contribution to the Second World War.

Although Panya Clark collected many stories and memories of her grandmother during her search for paintings and possessions, what appealed to her was the irreducible quiddity of her grandmother's things. The rift between knowledge and experience is paralleled for Clark by the seduction of images with their illusion of knowledge, and the practical enjoyment of experiencing real things in real time and space. This must go some way to explaining her insistence that, in a reversal of her use of images of images in *Research & Discovery*, she uses the paintings themselves

in *Re Appearances* as objects and not as images.

She decided to stage the "re-appearance" of the paintings in a mock-up of her grandmother's Rosedale drawing room. Although far from its original state—full of books, plants, furniture—she was able to paint the walls in the original grey-blue that was one of Paraskeva Clark's favourite colours. Her grandmother often set her subject in her drawing room; its furnishings appear in many paintings and the paintings themselves were often hung there. Clark was unable to include a fine portrait of her grandfather painted in that room in a chair that now belongs to her parents because the portrait is now a centrepiece in the AGO's new hanging of its Canadian collection. However, she was able to borrow eight other works for which she had some of the original components. Alice Sutton produced the dress and hat that she was wearing in her portrait (on a hanger, complete with the original drycleaner's label). Murray Adaskin, an old family friend, obliged with a pair of his spectacle lenses and handkerchief. The papers sent by Norman Bethune from Spain to his "friend and supporter Paraskeva Clark" are family treasures and the boat's tackle and pennant—re-sewn by Panya's sister—are still in use at the family's Muskoka cottage, just as in Paraskeva's time.

Re-stressing her interest in "the contradiction between the simple wooden bowl and the heavily framed picture," Clark found that it could not be a dispassionate interest. In effect, each object was able to show her how it was interpreted in a painting. "It brings you back out of the image . . . and you find the image is flat." *Re Appearances* might seem to consist of gestures of extraordinary literalness to counterpoint the ordinary illusions of painting, but the granddaughter's strategies actually draw on the codes of perspective and dramatic composition that were part of the grandmother's own practice. For example, in some elements of the display, especially that of the *Still Life with Alabaster Grapes* (1956), the spherical perspective that Paraskeva Clark had learned from her teacher Petrov-Vodkin in St. Petersburg, can be successfully mimicked. The artist's point of view can be re-established so that we understand exactly what she did with this precise disposition of tablecloth and bowl and grapes on a low table.

While Clark makes a public spectacle from the construction of a domestic still life and restores faith in her grandmother's simulations by providing their referents, one suspects that something else is at work in this installation's dramatic core. Panya Clark acknowledges that her own identity as artist and granddaughter is closely tied to her own social and personal rights in at least some of her grandmother's possessions.

One of anthropology's basic tenets has been that "reciprocal giving", having in order to give, is fundamental to the working of any society and explains the effort that people expend on making, acquiring, and disposing of material possessions, however scant. Recently, anthropologists like Annette Weiner and Nicholas Thomas have re-emphasized the power and the powerful ambivalences surrounding the keeping of possessions. Having goods and services to give is clearly crucial to any social role, but it is also clear that having enough to give, so that you can afford to

this page and facing page:

RE APPEARANCES 1993

mixed media with cast iron oar lock, wooden flag pole, brass boat lantern, wooden rowboat rudder, plastic lenses, wooden bowl and table, armchair, fabric hat and dress, brass candle holder, cotton tablecloth, green glass bowl, alabaster grapes, lacquered wooden tray, and parchment manuscript. This installation also incorporates the following works by Panya Clark's grandmother Paraskeva Clark 1898–1986: *Alice Sutton* 1950, *Still Life with Alabaster Grapes* 1956, *Artichokes* 1939, *X-mas Tree* 1951–52, *Boat House Still Life* 1954, *Portrait of Murray Adaskin* 1944–45, *Presents from Madrid* 1937, *Self Portrait with Concert Programme* 1942, *Letter to H.O. McCurry* 9 August, 1945.

41 PANYA CLARK

keep some back serves to maintain status, "to beware of loss, to preserve relationships and to guard sacred possessions." Objects that are held on to for these reasons Weiner calls "inalienable possessions," which are of higher value than others that can be freely exchanged. Among inalienable possessions, and here is the relevance to the Paraskeva/Panya connection, are those things which belong to a lineage and help to define it. Any given object can be re-classified from "alienable" to "inalienable" in the course of its socially symbolic trajectory through time. This happens when a bowl enshrined in one of Paraskeva Clark's paintings passes first from unremarkable domestic ornament to family keepsake, and then to inalienable possession when it re-appears in Panya Clark's installation.

In a sentence that could have been written about Panya Clark's project, Weiner says, "Even though permanence for all time is an impossibility, individuals and groups work with exacting care to recreate the past for the present so that what they do in the present affects the future." Panya Clark's mixture of excitement and melancholy testifies to the power of remarkable objects to rearrange the desires and the intellectual propositions with which we try to order our lives. Her work allows a staged glimpse at the accretion of symbolic meanings, some remembered, some forgotten, that builds up around inalienable objects.

In working, over a number of months, on *Re Appearances*, Clark came to realize that she had opened up a whole new melancholy realm. In this spectacle, this set, in which the paintings and their subject-objects are "frozen in particular positions, nailed down," she found herself fixing the flux of memory and desire and making something "dead, stale" about it. She found she had created an illusory tableau, a permanent set of relationships to which the shifting relations of real life will always give the lie.

While *Re Appearances* appears to satisfy some of the longing expressed in *Research & Discovery* it has set up its own longing. Like Steinbeck's characters, Clark recognizes that objects allow a two-way journey into and back out of history, but it is a journey without a final destination. "I wanted to bring the objects back to the point from which Paraskeva created . . . but I can't. I'm touching the mystery of the limit."

Charlotte Townsend-Gault is an anthropologist and a writer on contemporary culture who lives in Bowen Island, B.C.

WORKS CITED

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1983.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993.

Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black and Red Press, 1983.

Drucker, Johanna. "Simulation/Spectacle: Beyond the Boundaries of the Old Avant-Garde and Exhausted Modernism." *Third Text* (Spring 1993): 3-16.

hooks, bell. *Yearning: race, gender and cultural politics*. Boston: South End Press, 1990.

Lutz, Catherine A. and Jane L. Collins. *Reading National Geographic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

MacLachlan, Mary E. *Paraskeva Clark: Paintings and Drawings*. Halifax: Dalhousie University Art Gallery, 1982.

Thomas, Nicholas. *Entangled Objects*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Trinh T. Minh-ha. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Weiner, Annette. *Inalienable possessions: the paradox of keeping-while-giving*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.