

“Global Villages”: Protest, Art and Politics in Canada
(working paper)

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Introduction

This paper started out as one investigating the polysemic use of Marshall McLuhan's "global village," as a term that celebrated a spectacular version of multiculturalism, describing a post-national situation, without accounting for real differences of power and wealth. But it quickly became obvious that I was talking about something wider, and that "global villages" was just one vector for describing the shifting fields of cultural relations, as they folded into, collided with and avoided the competing fields of nationalism, multiculturalism, globalization and consumerism. For the most part, Marshall McLuhan has been largely erased from this paper. The visual matrix through which I was looking at "global villages," however, has remained, though now shifted to a focus on the contradictory spaces of urban protest and authoritative gallery.

Instead, I will begin with two images. The first is of a protest in Calgary, Alberta in the summer of 2002. As protesters gathered in the city against the G8 meeting in the remote location of Kananaskis, an image circulated through indymedia websites showing a crowd of people holding a variety of posters, in the centre one of the now familiar black and red silhouette image of Bolivian revolutionary Che Guevera. The second is of the clean ascetic space of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts where the "Global Village: The 1960s" show is currently on display. In the third room, titled "Disorder," the curators have included a poster of Guevera by Cuban artist Felix Beltran. The bright green and red of the poster stand out against the plain wall, as the spectator walks by, checking the label and moving onto the next item, and on through the show, past the display of psychedelic

ties, album covers, and Janis Joplin's painted Porsche, before being directed to the exhibition store, where a display of Che Guevara paraphernalia, notebooks, bags, and magnets sells "the revolution" to interested shoppers.

While this paper might fruitfully examine the semiotic importance of Che Guevara as sign, I have decided instead to use the two images of Guevara metaphorically, in order to look more closely at some of the issues surrounding the display and construction of protest in Canada. I suggest that these two images play nicely into competing narratives of nationality and post-nationality that characterize the museum space in Canada today. I also suggest, at the end of the paper, that as in the Guevara poster in the gallery, the rendering of protest as two-dimensional visual culture is problematic, as it collapses the sensory nature of bodily-experienced protest into easily manipulated visual material that can often mirror the tenets of the global capitalist society it seeks to challenge. Though the gallery is just one vector where this plays out, the coming together within its space of ideas of nationality, multiculturalism, visuality, globalization, international tourism and urban renewal make it a particularly rich location to unfold. Moving from the seething movements of people in the streets, through a series of leaps and bounds to the quiet, controlled space of the gallery, I hope in some small way to interrogate the moments where vision, culture and power intersect, and where the embodied subject is forced into a confrontation with desire, capital and subjectivity.

Visualizing Global Capitalism

Many of the arguments that I hope to make depend on a rough equation between capitalism as a hegemonic system filtered through neoliberal ideology, and visuality as a way of configuring that system for consumption (Baudrillard, 1998; Crary 1999; Debord, 1967; Jameson, 1991; Virillio, 1994). I am drawing here on the French Situationist Guy Debord, who suggests that sight has become commoditized to the extent that we live in a society of spectacle, one in which an image of reality comes to be seen as somehow

more truthful than reality itself (Debord, 1967). Sorting through the myriad of visual information that confronts us everyday, the mere act of perception becomes proprietary – to perceive something becomes indistinguishable from perceiving its value. Having said that, I don't want to overemphasize sight, or ocularcentrism here, but rather, am drawing on Jonathan Crary, who argues that vision is only one layer of the body that can be captured, shaped, or controlled by a range of external techniques; but, at the same time, it is also a layer capable of evading institutional capture and of inventing new forms, affects, and intensities. In other words, sight, within the embodied subject is both the location for control and for resistance (Crary, 1999, 1-5).

What I like about Crary's argument is his expansion of analyses of sight to situate both resistance and domination within the *attention* of the embodied subject. Perception, he argues, is inseparable from the process of modernization that made attention – either within disciplinary organizations, or as a constitutive element of a creative and free subjectivity – a central issue in the construction of a productive and manageable society (Crary, 1999, 29). As in Debord's analysis, where the logic of spectacle can be used against itself, for example in the efforts of numerous protesters who specifically use visibility (Debord, 1967/1983, 16), the protester/tourist/spectator/shopper moves through the city, their embodied gaze shifting restlessly, reifying or challenging power in the infinite momentary decisions to look at or to look away, to give attention to, or to keep moving.

I'm reading here against analyses that see the city as a place only of speed, and analyze the circulation of goods in a global world as a matter of always speeding up.¹ Rather, I would contrast this with a loose acceptance of Paul Virillio's argument that to

¹ This is a gloss of many much more nuanced studies, summarized here in the words of Alan Blum "The market-driven excitement of circulation, typically attributed to deregulation and the removal of restrictions on movement, created a frenzied experience of freedom from oppressive ties and hopes for liberation of potentialities from the burdens of the past (97)."

keep moving in a society that demands stopping, desiring and buying, is a revolutionary act (Virillio, 1977, 3-24).² The seductive appeal of commodity culture, its obsession with newness and upgrading, be it of product or experience, creates a society in which the gaze must be constantly focused on the new product, in which the embodied subject must be continually halted, and brought into the spaces of consumption.³ Having said this, I'm not arguing for continual movement as an antidote to global capitalism, although it is true, as shown by Reclaim the Streets, that it's hard to spend money when you're dancing, and it is also true, as street youth in Seattle recently demonstrated in a photographic exhibition, that standing still and refusing to move can be a political act against recently passed anti-loitering and anti-gathering laws (McCallum and Tarry, 2003). Rather, I am arguing for a politics of movement that resituates the gaze and the attentive body, suggesting that if culture has been commodified into politics by other means, there is always a space between the two waiting to be radically opened.

Protest(ers) Bodies

Might protest be one such space – a locus for disrupting the logic of the commoditized gaze? I'm focusing here on the Canadian context, examining the large-scale protests and demonstrations that have come to be lumped under the misnomer “anti-globalization,” and in which the increasingly rehearsed ballet of dissent almost inevitably ends in tear gas, violence and arrests. In spite of the intense visuality that characterizes the protest, in the moment itself the action is not experienced primarily visually. Instead it is a haptic moment, where the protester is not spectator, but participator in an experience that is defined through overwhelming sensory impact – the sound of bongo drums, chants, riot sticks beating on shields, protesters making a

² Virillio's argument gains credence from the fact that in 2001, the FBI listed Reclaim the Streets amongst the “Threats of Terrorism to the United States,” <www.reclaimthestreets.org>.

³ Shelley Rice (2000) and Anne Friedberg (1993) both describe the nineteenth and twentieth century processes through which the gaze and perception were transformed through processes of commodification.

rhythmic beat on anything metal, the acrid smell and taste of teargas, and the press of other bodies. Time is slowed, confused, in an upheaval that presents the movement of the crowd as the primary method of contextualization. Should one be in the midst of the teargas, then sight is barely an issue at all, because it is impossible to see, except, possibly, through the lens of a camera.

The ubiquitous use of cameras sets up an unstable moment, where the sensory experience is constantly in danger of being dis-embodied, reformatted and reincorporated into a lexicon of solely visual understanding. For this reason, there is a tension between protest as a series of momentary disturbances, around which comfortable narratives of nationhood, economics and desire quickly reformat themselves, and protest as action that can be spread through alternate means. As philosopher Brian Massumi points out, in spite of the one-sided coverage of most anti-globalization protests, word seeps out, breaking out of the bounded mainstream media newscasts, spreading through what he calls the affective channels of word-of-mouth and the internet (Massumi, 2003).⁴ For certain, the presence of cameras, in the hands of protesters, news reporters, police and spectators creates a strange situation of being able to see only through the eye of the camera, at once a truncation and doubling of vision, in that direct experience is distanced through the prosthetic eye of the camera, but the image of protest has a life long after the action itself.

Representations of protest circulate, recasting themselves as two-dimensional, disembodied and visual. In an image from the anti-WTO protests in Montreal this past summer, showing a black-clad protester breaking a window, and a woman wearing a business-suit looking on, the pinning down and capturing of protest make it infinitely manipulable, very much about representation, not at all about presence. Halted and

⁴ I suggest that the affective channels described by Massumi do not rely solely on the visual, but are often re-embodied through oral personal accounts that involve actions, gesture, and the description of the smells and sounds of the event.

reformatted for visual perusal, the added headline and description from the Gazette are hardly necessary – this is the moment where attention to the protester’s reasoning is pushed aside in favour of the easily classified image – the demonstrator is easily slotted into characterizations of violence, terrorism and fear.⁵ It is, to hijack a phrase from Susie O’Brien and Imre Szeman’s essay on content providers, “the transformation of culture into content,” where attention is focused, not on the protest, but on the protester’s halted action, captured as an explicit threat to capital as symbolized by the window, and the public as symbolized by the suit-clad onlooker (O’Brien and Szeman, 2002). Though word can, and does, spread through affective channels, the re-affirmation of boundaries of acceptable behaviour is all too easy once protest is removed from the sensory situation, and flattened for consumption (often, in the mass media, in the form of protesters breaking windows).

What is it about the breaking of windows that is so potentially threatening? Though obviously tied to private property fetish, this does not completely explain the complex relations that, in many media reports, construct the protester’s body as less important than the store window. Drawing on the archives of architecture, from Vitruvius, through Alberti, Walter Benjamin and others, the body, the city and the building have been closely linked through measurements deriving the ideal building from the ideal proportions subscribed to a mythical and godlike male body (Burgin, 141). As Elizabeth Grosz notes, the city is hence inherently masculine, as patriarchy plays out in the construction, space and place of everyday buildings (Grosz, 1995). Dodging between the buildings of an always-already masculine city, hemmed in on all sides by the forces

⁵ The headline in *The Gazette* read “WTO foes promise more confrontations: More than 230 arrested,” while the picture caption read “A pedestrian watches in shock as a demonstrator heaves a road sign through the window of the Gap clothing store on Ste. Catherine St. during a violent anti-WTO protest. (Gazette, July 28, 2003, A1).”

charged with protecting that power, what is a protester to do? Or perhaps from the other side, the question might be, what is to be done to the protester?

Though summarized briefly here, I suggest that the circulation of global capitalism, combined with an emphasis on the visual (hence seeing the protester as object rather than subject), has created a situation where the bizarre assertion that windows are more important than people, can be made. Capitalism has turned, according to Massumi, from a focus on tangible objects to a focus on intangibles – copyrights, patents, and intellectual property. In turn, this intangibility affects all elements of social life, so that, for example, as humans are fragmented into so many patentable genes, the body becomes as intangible as other tradeable commodities (Massumi, 2003). Outside of its tradeable components, the protester's body is easily constructed as unimportant, and as lawless – something outside of everyday protection, undefined by normal behavioural borders, and open to assault from the police and mainstream media. In turn, the protester attacks that which is most tangible – the armour-clad bodies of the riot police and the glass front of the retail outlet. I would push this further, to argue that laws passed making corporations legally persons have had the effect of appropriating the normal protections that society accords human bodies. In effect, the point where product and consumer meet, the retail outlet, becomes the pristine body, needing protection from the protester's imperfect and dirty shell.

It might be argued that this is the final collapse of, or perhaps the final assault against, the demarcation between interior and exterior. A modern dialectic begun by late nineteenth and early twentieth century architects of walls of steel and glass, permeable to the gaze, socialist in intent, has had the opposite effect, according to Victor Burgin of creating “the social isolation in and between high-rise apartment houses, the death of the street as a site of social interaction, and the practice of ‘zoning,’ which establishes absolute lines of demarcation between work and residential areas, and between cultural

and commercial activities. The transparent wall ... was destined to become the very index of capitalist corporate exclusivity (Burgin, 146).” Despite the ability to “see” through it, glass was never that permeable, though the body has become increasingly so.

Intangible Nations

The intangible nature of global trade creates many of these flips, rendering the intangible tradeable, and the boundaries of the tangible porous and ill-defined. One of these flips takes place as geographic borders are emptied of significance for the passage of goods, while the national body itself, the idea of the nation, the imagined community defined by Benedict Anderson becomes tradeable commodity. This is present for example, in the hyper-Canadian advertisements for American or multinational owned companies such as Tim Hortons and Coke, but also, I argue, in the traditional spaces of national self-definition, in this case exemplified through the seemingly hermetic spaces of Canada’s authoritative museums and galleries. The slippery relations between visual/bodily, tangible/intangible are echoed in the playing out of a national/post-national moment.

In the early 1990s art historians began to look at the gallery as a space for national meaning-making, symbolically enacting a relationship between citizen and state, while creating narratives of nationality through visual celebrations of nation (in Canada generally manifested through the Group of Seven) (Duncan and Wallach, 1980; Duncan 1995). Unlike in the United States, where national aspects were often subsumed into corporate agendas (for example in the whitewashing of corporate images through carefully selected sponsorships, or in the outright collusion of brands and art, such as Hugo Boss and Ralph Lauren exhibitions at the Met, or Addidas sneakers at the San Francisco Art Museum), in Canada exhibition sponsorship more often coincided with a perceived need to protect Canadian culture. What occurred, for example through the 1989 building of the Canadian Museum of Civilization as what then director George

MacDonald called a “pilgrimage site,” which all “good citizens” should visit, was the construction of a seemingly unified narrative of Canadian nationality as something that could be *seen*.

Given the first half of this paper, it should not be surprising that there is money to be made off visual constructions of Canadian culture. For this reason, in spite of the fact that since the signing of the 1988 Free Trade Agreement there has indeed been a gutting of social funding for the arts, (Crean, 1987-88; Crean 2000; Lum, 1999; Tuer, 1992) there has also been a glut of large-scale museum building and renovation, and a focus of corporate sponsorship on exhibitions advancing a parochial “Canadian” nationalism.⁶ American Express, for example, during its attempt to break into the Canadian market, sponsored the 1999 Cornelius Krieghoff show complete with stereotyped images of nineteenth century winter landscapes and happily carousing French Canadian *habitants*. Stikeman Elliot, a law firm and strong supporter of the arts in Canada, helped the Canadian government to negotiate the NAFTA before donating money to exhibitions such as “Life and Stuff: Greg Curnoe” with its pro-hockey and quaintly anti-American sentiment – Greg Curnoe’s 1960s buttons reading “close the 49th parallel” became, in the exhibition, the kitsch of old-style protest politics. Indeed, the gallery can even be seen to play the role of capital/cultural ambassador, as in the months after the signing of the NAFTA, the National Gallery organized “Terre Sauvage,” an exhibition designed to raise awareness of Canadian art and culture in the States and Latin American countries, while the McMichael helped to organize “A Place of Their

⁶ While smaller galleries have been hit hard, resulting in numerous recent closures (for example the Dunlop Gallery in Regina, and the recent gutting of funding to the Ottawa cultural scene), large galleries continue to be built: since 1989, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the National Gallery, the Canadian War Museum, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the Holocaust Museum in Winnipeg, the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Royal Ontario Museum, have all received new buildings or significant renovations.

Own,” an exhibition quickly dubbed the NAFTA show due to the nationality of its three artists: Frida Kahlo (Mexican), Georgia O’Keefe (American) and Emily Carr (Canadian).

However, this easy conflation of nationality and sponsorship received a shock in 2003, when the Art Gallery of Ontario closed its well-known historical Canadian wing, citing the need to save money while the new Frank Gehry expansion of the museum was under construction. The closure of the collection, with its emphasis on the Group of Seven, Krieghoff, and others who had been the staples of blockbuster Canadian culture exhibitions, raised the ire of the public and the media. “Taking the Group of Seven out of the art gallery is like taking the totem poles out of the ROM [Royal Ontario Museum]. Why else does the place exist?” wrote Margaret Wente in the *Globe and Mail*. Though writing from her self-proclaimed reactionary position, Wente’s comments echo many of those in Canadian newspapers from the period. The AGO has gone on record smoothing over the closure of the old wing, virtually ignoring the new smaller/temporary Canadian section, and highlighting the future of the gallery – the gleaming façade of the Frank Gehry expansion and the importance of the new collection donated by business magnate Kenneth Thomson that will be highlighted in the new area.⁷ All of a sudden the Frank Gehry wing, with its implications for international tourism has become the attraction itself – Canadian art has been placed on the backburner, at least for the time being. What had been national pilgrimage has now become international destination.

What has occurred, I suggest, is the playing out of the national/post-national moment, as the perceived need to create a unified Canadian culture, meets the need to attract capital investment and international tourism. The former façade of the museum as temple has given way to the gleaming façade of commodity culture. With recent renovations to the ROM by the Daniel Libeskind Group and the Art Gallery of Ontario by

⁷ Parts of the collection have been rehung in a much smaller temporary space which combines the traditional collection with work by First Nations and other visible minority artists (arguably presenting a much more balanced view of art production in a multicultural nation).

Frank Gehry, the architectural shell has become as much an attraction as the collection inside. This is the building as spectacle, the building as tangible body that others those unwelcome in its halls.

Staging the 60s

How to bring the elements of this paper together? The whirling vortex of global justice protesters gathering in Canada's city, the tangible/intangible nature of buildings and bodies, the national/post-national space of the gallery, and hanging above all of these, the importance of visibility to regimes of power. When, in July 2003, protesters and ideas of Canadian nationalism collided at protests against the WTO in Montreal, newspapers could not subsume the two into a single narrative. Protesters tended to be constructed as outsiders, as un-Canadian. But, whether through coincidence or twist of fate, Canada's authoritative galleries have been able to bring all aspects together, primarily through nostalgic reference to the 1960s. While not arguing for a simplistic cause-effect relationship here, I would suggest that the use of 1960s offers a way of creating new histories of Canadian nationality/post-nationality by pushing globalization back, and constructing the present situation with its large scale tear gassings and protests simply as a nostalgic re-living of 1960s dissent. The "good citizens" of MacDonald's earlier comment probably don't engage in the unruly nature of global justice protest, but they might enjoy reliving its predecessor within the gallery space. For this reason, I suggest, there are, over the next four years, seven separate large-scale exhibitions of 1960s art and culture in Canada's authoritative galleries and museums, each with its own section on protest and dissent.

Using the 1960s as subject opens up the gallery for the combination of narratives of nationality and post-nationality. While a strong contingent of Canadian artists such as Greg Curnoe, Joyce Wieland and Michael Snow can support the sort of unifying national narrative present in earlier exhibitions (both Curnoe and Wieland were fierce

nationalists), the ability to open up the 60s to virtually any realm – pop culture, pop art, protest, for example, makes a focus on the decade a perfect attraction for international tourism, particularly when housed in the new architectural centrepieces of the city. The 1960s become infinitely consumable, while the galleries in which the art exhibitions are housed have become the tangible endpoints for the marketing of Canada as international/national/postnational destination.

At present the first exhibition “Global Village: The 1960s” has opened at the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal, sponsored by Hydro Québec, and the Paul Desmarais Fund, with its links to Powercorp, Jean Chrétien, and Paul Martin’s Liberal government.⁸ In its exhibition catalogue, curator Stéphane Aquin first sets up the global village as a uniting force in a divided world, and then writes cogently of the problems involved in his utopia – namely the unequal distribution of power and money through the world. But through a discursive turn highlighting only the aesthetic aspects of the 1960s, Aquin is able to avoid the potential pitfalls of delving too deeply into the fallout of 1960s politics (1-10). Instead, the exhibition is set up as one investigating two questions: first, was there a global aesthetic present in 1960s art and design? And second, did artists respond aesthetically to the political events of the time? Art works by politically motivated artists such as Faith Ringold and Nikki de Saint Phalle are subsumed into an overarching narrative of the 1960s as a period with many of the same issues facing us today. Visitors move between rooms labeled “media,” “space,” “disorder,” and “change,” where protest is present, but rendered two dimensional, and addressed within a politics of looking that brings the viewer’s eye into focus for a moment, before moving onto the next item. Within the exhibition, the spectator is concerned with what will come next, in

⁸ Powercorp is a Montreal based holding company, with investments primarily in the media and health insurance. The CEO, Paul Desmarais, is related to Jean Chrétien through marriage, and gave Paul Martin a job before selling him Canada Steamship Lines in the 1980s
www.powercorp.ca.

essence replication the ocular-centrism of commodity culture (Debord, 1994; Crary, 1999).

In this manner, the exhibition touches on all the points raised in this paper. Through the use of Canadian media scholar Marshall McLuhan's term "global village" the idea of Canadian multiculturalism is expanded to encompass the whole globe, notwithstanding the cultural/colonial impulse that this might disguise. Second, globalization is pushed back to the 1960s, making its current manifestation seemingly less threatening, while the emphasis on aesthetics of course has the corollary of aestheticizing politics – hence why Felix Beltran's poster of Che Guevera does not seem out of place. The architectural space of the gallery creates an experience akin to the stopping and starting that I describe as exemplary of movement through the commoditized spaces of the city. The gaze is not focused except on what is coming next –the allure of the always new.

Conclusion

Back to the two images with which I started – the Che Guevera poster at the anti-G8 protests in Calgary, and the Felix Beltran poster in the museum. What is different, I suggest, is the way that they attract the gaze and engage with the senses. The grainy photo of the Calgary protest shows the press of the crowd, someone playing a drum, someone else with their mouth caught open, shouting. Though still, it participates in the sensory moment, and because of this, it has the potential to be re-embodied. The second, within the museum space, as suggested above, participates in a commoditized viewership, catching the spectator's glance only momentarily. Both are caught up in narratives of post-nationality, in the circulation of goods, objects and people, and in scopical regimes that complicate some of the binary divisions that I have introduced above. Playing through each are the "codified" 1960s – the intangible elements of post-nationality, globalization, desire and capital that may play out through affective

resonance, or may be easily swept up into the mainstream in the commodification of vision and the visionary impulse. But, each captured through the prosthetic eye of the camera, or flattened through the processes the two-dimensional art making has a different potential with regard to re-embodiment, to the places of their display, and to the suppression or addition of information surrounding them.

The steps of the Vancouver Art Gallery, on Canada's west coast are the location where I will end. The gallery itself has a resonant history, first as courthouse where the 1920s potlatch confiscations and aboriginal land seizures took place, then as the site for the violent arrest of First Nations activist Leonard Pelletier. Artist and curator Doreen Jensen claims this plays out in the site and space of the gallery, reflecting the gallery's contentious history in all the exhibitions that take place there. Indeed, the Vancouver Art Gallery steps have become the centrepiece many of the protests that take place in the city. Centrally located and boasting a large-scale marble staircase, protesters gather each weekend, no matter what the issue. Circulating through the space, using the public bathrooms, telephones and café in the gallery, protesters give speeches then move out through the city. For me this is an extremely resonant image, as people move away from the gallery it fades into the background, becoming the ground against which the figures of the protesters, posters and banners are defined – the still versus the moving, the embodied nature of the protest contrasting the static gallery. A photograph of an anti-war protest, where demonstrators occupy the steps in front of banners advertising an exhibition of traditional Canadian Group of Seven-style landscape paintings, is for me the exact point where culture and politics pull apart, radically opening the confluences of culture, nationalism and capital and just waiting for something to happen.

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