

## PRIVATE PUBLIC ART VENUES & THE UNTAMED AUDIENCE

### BY ROSEMARY HEATHER

If a tree lives for 100 years it is because it obeys the logic of its own being. In the same way a building is built to facilitate commerce, and a house to put a roof over one's head. Amongst this economy of purpose, within which each part connects according to its own rationale, art too has its place.

As the 20th century progressed, artworks increasingly took on the ability to adopt the features of other things, and yet still remain art. The intangible but definite authority of

the institution ensured this, as if the context of art itself were the author. The guarantee provided by the institution is such that artworks often took to dissembling, to looking not like art; this effort to deceive as to their purpose or authenticity becoming one of the conditions of their engagement.

In the traditional gallery space the convention of blankness – the typically white-painted walls – and the practice of placing works equidistant from one another both work as surrogates for contemplation. As a conduit for attention, peace and

quiet are as important a facet of the modern gallery-going experience as popcorn is to the cinema or beer to the enjoyment of a baseball game.

Because in the post-minimalist era the gallery plays such a large role in art's gestation, it also tends to insulate the artwork from the world. By creating the conditions for its encounter and providing a historical /conceptual framework of meaning, the art institution incidentally harbours its fair share of intimidation. Like the high-end fashion store, the art gallery beckons most invitingly to a clientèle of the initiated.

For the most obvious of reasons, art presented outside the gallery has a more definite connection to the world around it. An artwork presented on a billboard or in a storefront is available for anyone to look at. The irony of this, however, is that making art more visible to the world does not make its purpose in that world – its interconnectedness with it – easier to understand.

Two Toronto venues, The Balcony and Solo Exhibition, act to a certain extent like regular art galleries. Each new show is announced with a press release, and until recently, an opening



event. A balcony and a storefront window respectively, both spaces have been in operation for roughly two years, and each was inspired by the architectural features of its proprietor's private living arrangements.

Implicitly, public venues that push the artwork beyond the threshold of its known reception abandon notions cherished by the art world about its own significance. Public exhibition, like a public execution, blows open the closed circuit of artwork and audience to the hazards of incidental spectatorship and the possibility of widespread indifference.

As the makers of Hollywood blockbusters know, a certain predictability of format is a key parameter in the building of audiences. A fixed location and a singular framework of presentation help to set up a rhythm of expectation. Provided the work fits within its narrow dimensions, Solo Exhibition is hospitable to the presentation of *objets d'art*, but often supports other, more quixotic ventures. Enacting a five-day, 9-5 performance called *Watch*, Germaine Koh positioned herself on a chair within the space's narrow confines to

observe street traffic and watch pedestrians. Koh's feat of endurance conjured for many a kind of empathetic claustrophobia verging on panic. It also caught the attention of the *Globe and Mail's* Leah McLaren, who thought the performance suitable material for column inches. Taking on the task of interpreting the work for the general public, McLaren first dismisses Koh as a heroin addict and then writes that she also sat for a period of time in a storefront window but found the undertaking boring. As a representative of a world not invested in the discourse of art, McLaren finds little of interest to say about Koh's effort, and manages to convey this successfully to her readers. Like all of her work, Koh's performance was deliberately understated, but contextualized by the commercial interests of the storefront spaces on either side of her. By providing a gap in the rhythm of commerce and putting herself on the line to do it, Koh offered her audience another, subtler kind of exchange.

Because it is less obviously an art project, The Balcony is able to add inflection to its visual environment in

a manner that is both conspicuous and unassuming. Located at a T-intersection bordering on a small park, the venue has shown an international roster of artists, who were invited to create works for a small billboard on the balcony exterior. The site's most spectacular visual intervention into the neighbourhood was by Nestor Kruger. The artist's giant "one-way" sign echoed the actual street directive attached to a pole below. Superimposing itself on the smaller sign's function, Kruger's work was a triumph of hyperbolic redundancy, pointing to precisely those elements in our environment that are otherwise invisible except for their functional efficacy. In a more recent project, Oona Stern's simple brickwork graphic reinforced the venue's visual consonance with its surroundings. Stern's conceptual trick conspired to use signage to efface the site's function as sign, returning the building to its simple purpose as house, just another member of the neighbourhood again.

In the eighties there was a vogue for public art projects, government funded extravaganzas meant to lure

the attention of passersby, and in the process contribute to the general betterment of things. In keeping with a social climate marred by homelessness, AIDS and Ronald Reagan, artists delivered messages of political import – or agitation – from on high, and the art world understood itself to be not part of the problem. Recent public art projects are less vainglorious and more humble in ambition. Privately run public ventures in particular seek to educate no one and illustrate nothing, hoping instead to create an audience born of fleeting connections and happy accidents of meaning.

*Rosemary Heather writes freelance, and recently launched the project [www.mobydickonline.org](http://www.mobydickonline.org), which presents the entire text of Herman Melville's novel Moby Dick one word at a time, continuously for one year.*