

**Reviewed by
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Is Toronto Burning?

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Is Toronto Burning?: 1977 | 1978 | 1979 Three Years in the Making (and Unmaking) of the Toronto Art Scene, Art Gallery of York University, Toronto, September 17–December 7, 2014

Is Toronto Burning?: 1977 | 1978 | 1979 Three Years in the Making (and Unmaking) of the Toronto Art Scene at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU) recounts an impassioned yet brief period of revolutionary cultural production in which artists were actively engaged in polemical and political discourse. As the city continues to swell with emerging artists, it is unlikely that younger generations are aware of its

revolutionary history. Little was mentioned of this radical period during my own schooling as an art student at the University of Toronto many years ago. Why is this the case? According to curator Philip Monk, “there is a resistance to history in Toronto” (personal conversation, November 10, 2014). With this statement in mind, the exhibition simultaneously rights such historical forgetfulness and ratifies the closing years of the 1970s. As a retrospective survey, *Is Toronto Burning?* documents a vast quantity of artwork and archival material, and Monk amasses videos, photographic works, newspaper articles, periodicals, posters and other ephemera that underpin the anatomy of an art scene. Focused on the emergent downtown art community, the exhibition examines artistic discourse as it expanded beyond the field of art and into the areas of fashion, semiotics and punk music. The inclusion of fashion is particularly poignant as it demonstrates the synthesis of cultural production—a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk* or total work of art—and connects to the longer radical tradition of the artistic avant-garde. For instance, for artists such as the Vienna Secessionists, Russian Constructivists and Italian Futurists, their aim to transform everyday life included attempts to reform fashion, which in turn would disseminate their revolutionary intentions more widely.

The radical nature of the exhibition is rendered aesthetically, as the gallery walls are painted in black, grey, red and white, recalling Russian Constructivist graphic design and Chinese Proletariat propaganda. Upon entering the gallery space, the viewer is immediately presented with the video *Press Conference* (1977), by art collective General Idea. The collective’s members—Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal and A.A. Bronson—conduct a mock press conference in which they pose the question “what is effective art?” To the left of the video is Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge’s nine-part series of silver gelatin photographs *Art is Political* (1975; Figure 1), as if to answer the call to General Idea’s questions of effective art. The work features the artists in positions evocative of Yvonne Rainer dance moves hybridized with Chinese agitprop, against

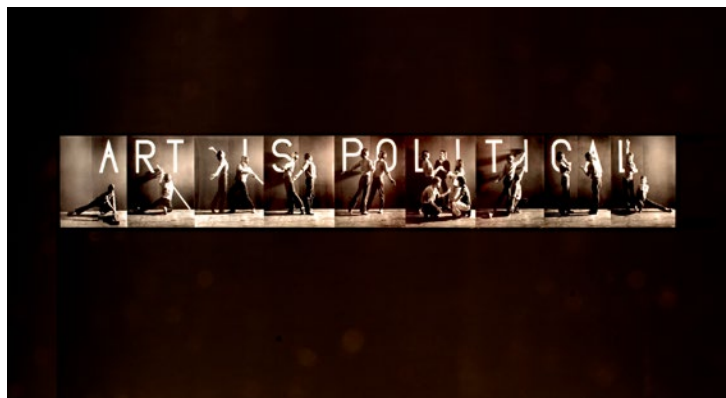


Figure 1

Installation view of Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, *Art is Political*, 1975. Silver gelatin prints, series of 9, each 16 x 20 inches (40.64 x 50.8 cm). Photo: Cheryl O'Brien.

Figure 2

Isobel Harry, *Fashion Burn at the Crash 'n' Burn*, June 1977 (reprinted 2014). Silver gelatin print, 8 x 10 inches (20.32 x 25.4 cm). Courtesy the artist.



a backdrop of large paper block letters mounted to a wall, spelling out “ART IS POLITICAL.” It is these two initial works that set the revolutionary tone and theoretical framework for the exhibition. Monk explicitly connects Toronto’s artistic avant-garde with the understanding of vanguard cultural production as inherently engaged with its own politics, but also with the public sphere more generally.

In the next room, Isobel Harry’s photographs of the performance piece *Fashion Burn* (1977) at Centre for Experimental Art and Communication’s (CEAC)¹ basement punk club Crash ‘n’ Burn, captures the frenzied punk scene enmeshed with Toronto art during a night that also included sets from local bands including The Dishes, The Poles and The Viletones. The performance, which parodied the fashion show format, featured female models posing in DIY outfits comprised of everyday materials (e.g. a bustier constructed of black electrical tape adhered directly to the skin), plastic rainwear and undergarments worn as overgarments (Figure 2). Explicitly anti-fashion designs, resembling fetishwear ensembles, create visual “noise” (Hebdige 1979: 88) to complement punk music’s sonic cacophony and resist traditional notions of prettiness associated with femininity (Hebdige 1979: 107); they are trashy, vulgar in comparison to the fashion industry’s common association with elegance and glamour. A photograph of Lucasta Rochas, vocalist in the band The B-Girls, shows her dressed in a cowboy hat with plastic cling-film wrapped around her torso; strategically placed cutout stars and block letters reading “bang bang” cover her chest. A vitrine across from Harris’ photographs houses a copy of the “Punk ‘Til You Puke!” issue of the General Idea magazine *FILE Magazine* (1977), which is open to a fashion spread for *Fashion Burn*. The spread includes a recipe for artist David Buchan’s “New Wave Flambe,” whose

Figure 3

Installation view of David Buchan, *Modern Fashions Suite*, 1977. Silver gelatin print, 46 x 60 inches (114.3 x 152.4 cm). Photo: Cheryl O'Brien.



ingredients read like a grocery list: garbage bags, bandages, safety pins and tape, instructing the reader to “Add eight young girls (not too tender), one artiste (not too jaded), shake (but don’t break) and bake. Serve hot” (Buchan 1977: 60). The irony and disruption of fashion’s semantic code is outright and unapologetic. The exhibit clearly demonstrates how, through punk, art, performance and fashion collide in an offense on propriety and notions of conventional beauty.

In an adjacent room, a blowup black and white photo series by Buchan entitled *Modern Fashions Suite* (1977; Figure 3) appropriates the language of magazine fashion advertisements. Buchan specifically modeled these works after advertisements in the men’s magazine *Esquire*, with individual satirical titles such as *Dissidents with a Difference* and *Men Like You Like Semantic T-Shirts*. In the photograph *Atten(ua)tion Please*, a dramatically lit Buchan wears a puffy snowsuit and metallic boots; he stands with his legs together, toes pointed outward, leaning back, and one hand on the hip with another holding out a timepiece in the shape of a paint palette. His pose is graceful, almost balletic, and decidedly feminine. The accompanying text reads: “What we’d like to sell you here is an idea. Tapered extremities and inflated sensibilities. Style without content, form without function, Art for Art’s Sake.” The text inserts a distinctly queer sensibility while prodding at the absurdity of mainstream fashion discourse and the identities it seeks to shape.

On the opposite wall, Buchan’s photographs are complemented by General Idea’s series of 10 C-prints *S/HE* (1977; reprinted 2014). Shot in what appears to be a professional photo studio, the works feature a male and female model posing in a variety of overacted stances, juxtaposed with text which both questions/probes at the models’ inner life and simultaneously deconstructs fashion imagery as a whole. As Monk

points out, through a critical examination of the nature of fashion, the photographs play with the construction of gender and sexuality. Influenced by semiotics, *Modern Fashions Suite* and *S/HE* foreshadow the English translation of Roland Barthes's widely cited text *The Fashion System* ([1967] 1983) and its examination of real and written vestimentary code. In this pairing of fashion image and text, Buchan and General Idea's photographs effectively parody artifice in the fashion system and subversively engage identity politics.

Buchan and General Idea's photo series are bookended by two video works: Susan Britton's *And a Woman* and Rodney Werden's *Say* (both 1978), each of which presents a version of binary gender. While the former features Britton performing as the stereotypical feminine woman seen in a video replete with aural and visual cues including soft music, blowing air and a deliberately out-of-sync dubbing that satirizes foreign films, it is the latter that subverts gender. In Werden's video, a female with short, cropped hair is dressed in a masculine suit. The positioning of her body mimics the mannerisms of a confident, Alpha male: she sits on the edge of a chair, legs spread, holding a cigarette and a tumbler of whiskey. Off-camera, a male voice feeds the woman a long list of words to repeat including "mouth, tongue, slippery, teeth." Individually, the words are not suggestive; together they connote a sadomasochistic tone and a sense of sexual violence. Using the body, Werden's piece at once portrays and disrupts social constructions of gender and sexuality where cross-dressing and performance queer the boundaries of those very constructions.

The placement of Britton and Werden's works smartly and seamlessly links with the next section comprised of the works of video art pioneer Colin Campbell. Simulating television, the video *Modern Love* (1978)



Figure 4

Installation view of Colin Campbell, *Bad Girls*, 1979–1980. Video, 60:00 minutes. Photo: Cheryl O'Brien.

constructs the narrative of its main character, Naïve Robin (played by a cross-dressing Campbell), a girlish secretary from the suburbs who falls for entertainer La Monte (played by Buchan). On the other side of the gallery glass doors is Campbell's *Bad Girls* (1979–1980), a serial work that was shown in weekly segments at art-hangout the Cabana Room at the Spadina Hotel (Figure 4). Campbell appears once again as Robin, who this time attempts to gain access to a downtown new wave club (also) called the Cabana Room. Monk's thoroughly considered strategy of overcoming the division between gallery spaces is apparent; watching *Bad Girls*, the viewer can at the same time glimpse *Modern Love* through the glass door. The side-by-side placement of the videos allows the viewer to draw conceptual and visual connections between the two, but also suggests the mirroring of narratives where Campbell's videos retell the development of the downtown art scene. In works such as these, fashion is not overt, but rather exists as a medium that in concert with performance, expresses and problematizes sexual and gendered identity. The cross-pollination between disciplinary forms during this short period of discourse demonstrates the radical blurring of boundaries. Along with other mass methods of production, including video, television and print publication, fashion is one such strategy in transmitting the revolutionary message of the artistic avant-garde.

As a key component in the formation of identity, fashion is a communicative tool that sits at the intersection of art, everyday life and politics. The integration of fashion into art-making practice during this intense period establishes its revolutionary role in the reconstruction of the social order. The artists crafted their identities through the subversion of gender and sexuality which contributed to the construction of the community. The direct depiction of the artists' collaborative efforts and active participation in each other's works means the exhibition viewer is made keenly aware of this hive of collectivity. Confronted by a substantial amount of information and text, the viewer must actively engage with the radical history that is presented. To counter what Monk (personal conversation, November 10, 2014) sees as Toronto's "resistance to history" he seeks to "create an iconic moment" in art discourse by reasserting this self-made scene's role in the history of Toronto art. Distinctly conscious of his curatorial role as history-maker, Monk presents a strong argument in *Is Toronto Burning?* for this pivotal moment in the city's then fledgling downtown art community. In this way, the exhibition succeeds in its mighty premise. The materials at hand prompt one to reflect, and perhaps yearn for a period of more fervent activity. At the end of the exhibition, the question lingers: is the current art scene in Toronto burning? Monk challenges the city's artists to once again produce an effective, politically engaged art that too can one day be written into the history of Toronto art.

Note

1. From 1975 to 1978, CEAC was a venue that supported the production and exhibition of avant-garde art in Toronto, and served as a literal center for the developing downtown Toronto art scene. An editorial of CEAC's publication *STRIKE* in May 1978 condoned the violent tactics of Italian left-wing group Red Brigades. Following this, a media firestorm erupted and federal and provincial art councils cut funding to CEAC, resulting in its closure.

References

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