

Rightfully Yours

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[See table of contents](#)

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Rightfully Yours

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Rightfully Yours, was an intellectually thrilling and politically provocative exhibition mounted by young curator Tejpal Singh Ajji. Through a wide range of Canadian and international performance-based work—very broadly defined—he created a laboratory to consider how artists insert themselves into a contemporary world wracked by conflicts over territory and identity, investigating what rights they—or any of us—have to legitimately take on and occupy others' positions. Artists here are productively framed as invaders, reinvigorating debates over cultural trespass and appropriation while never losing sight of the potent pleasures that come with transgressions of symbolic and actual property, of insider and outsider knowledges. Ajji's exhibition offered a highly nuanced and multi-faceted perspective on artists' venturing where they don't belong, frequently finding them to be mediators of conflicts between different publics.



The raw, beating heart of the show was Steven Cohen's 2001 video *Chandelier*, projected large in a darkened nook and casting a figural

shadow over the entire exhibition. Cohen, a queer, Jewish South African, stumbles through a Johannesburg shantytown that is being torn down

around its residents. In elaborate bejeweled makeup, Cohen wears a large, jangling crystal chandelier as a dress: he is a spectacle of white privilege. Striking mannered poses in his precariously towering platform heels, he is as in danger of collapse as the fragile shacks around him. A few locals are joyful and many are shocked; to some he is an angel sent from God; to one a whore to be fucked. Regardless, he continues his halting choreography through a ravaged landscape of poverty, disenfranchisement and despair decked out in the chi-chi symbols of a feminized, decadent elite (also flagged as Jewish through the Stars of David he wears on his body), haughtily refusing to communicate verbally. A catalyst amid chaos, Cohen is alternately threatened and protected, cursed and blessed. Cohen is not personally responsible for apartheid or the glaring economic injustice that remains in its aftermath, yet we fear

Steven COHEN, *Chandelier*, 2001. Performance Installation View. Courtesy of JMB Gallery and the artist.

← Mattias OLOFSSON, *Culture Constructing Nature #2*, 2005. Colour photograph. 12.5 in x 16.5 in. Courtesy of the artist.

→ Steven COHEN, *Chandelier*, 2001. Performance. Courtesy of John Hogg and the artist.



that the artist's mere presence in the shantytown wearing his ridiculous finery and frippery further subjugates the squatters. But clearly, feelings of being mocked by this intervention do not approach the devastation they have experienced as a result of the social and economic conditions under which they live. Cohen becomes an easy target for our disapproval, but only because systemic injustice rarely clowns for its victims and makes a spectacle of itself like cosmopolitan artists do. Similarly, in a video Andy Bichlbaum of The Yes Men is castigated by a BBC newscaster for the organization's "cruel trick" of fraudulently getting the people of Bhopal's hopes up with their wish-fulfilling prank of devising a televised apology on behalf of Dow Chemical for the ruinous Union Carbide disaster. As if their brazen act of corporate humiliation and sabotage were more malicious than the company's far-greater

crime of destroying thousands of Indian lives in the first place.

Cohen's piece establishes drag as an important theme here, one that offers a compelling model for identity in our current historical moment. Costumes are an important element of the show, as artists get tricked out as Miss Canadiana (Camille Turner), Lesbian Rangers (Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan), and a doctor willing to write excuse notes (Alison S.M. Kobayashi). Artists both dress up and dress down, performing figures of authority (and assuming their powers), taking on the guises of the abject, and confusing such dichotomies. For example, Sisley Xhafa declared himself the unofficial 1997 Albanian representative at neighbouring Italy's Venice Biennale, where he roamed the grounds in the guise of a soccer player, thus embodying both prized sports hero and pavilion-deprived Balkan tran-

THE YES MEN, *Dow Chemical to Clean Up Bhopal*, 2005.
3 Channel Video.
Courtesy of the artists.



Sisley XHAFI,
Padiglione Clandestino,
1997. Unauthorized
performance during the
Venice Biennial.
Copyright and courtesy
of Sisley Xhafa.



sient. Similarly, Alicia Framis's large gown made from the near-indestructible fabric Twaron was intended as protective armour for women, but was also emblazoned with abusive and derogatory phrases chosen by women and copyrighted to prevent their public use again. Through publicizing violent speech, the dress transposes the shame of abuse from victim to perpetrator.

Mattias Olofsson's drag is his ongoing performance as a real nineteenth-century Sami woman named Stor-Stina, here seen in a video learning to speak the slang Rinkeby-Swedish. As Stor-Stina, Olofsson mediates anxieties between the indigenous Sami, non-indigenous Swedes and their state, and young, suburban immigrants, whose patois Stor-Stina receives lessons in. It seems that Rinkeby-Swedish is not so much about words as about the correct physical performance of masculinity (the coach acts as if he does not notice that Olofsson's persona

is a woman) and their linguistic exercises add a further layer of ethnocultural drag to Olofsson's work.

Other artists infringe on *Rightfully Yours*, and the art world itself, from its margins. Washington, DC-based Minging Mike made covers for his own imaginary soul albums with paper, pencil and ink that reference the black community and its struggles in the late sixties and seventies. He is present here both for his self-insertion into the recording industry and as a sort of meta-commentary, the "outsider" artist as an interloper in a show otherwise populated by "professionals." His handmade albums about sickle-cell anemia, drug abuse, bad landlords, Bruce Lee and Vietnam are examples of history told from the ground up, broad issues filtered through the mind and hands of a fantasist into poignant cultural emblems.

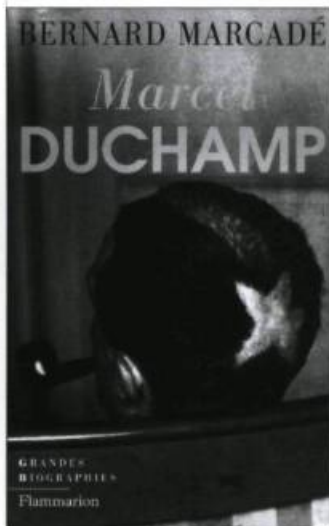
With their status as entertainment rather than art, Sacha Baron Cohen's creations Borat, Bruno and Ali G are interlopers here as well, and we are invited to partake of their pleasures on YouTube on our own time. The corporate profit motive makes us immediately more suspicious of Cohen's intercultural exhibitionism than if he were a credentialed contemporary artist with an explicitly critical agenda. (Framing the show with two Cohens suggests homage to the diasporic "wandering" Jew as a model for all the artists' border-transgressing peregrinations.)

With a deep respect for ambiguity, uncertain emotions and irony's insights, Ajji's exhibition was a preternaturally mature and satisfying effort. As with the prominent comma in the exhibition title that demands we sign on to its project — and assert our own agency in the process — Ajji leaves for us to fill in many blanks in *Rightfully Yours*. ←

Rightfully Yours

Wendy Coburn, Steven Cohen, Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, Alicia Framis, Alison S.M. Kobayashi, Minging Mike, Mattias Olofsson, The Yes Men, Camille Turner, Sisley Khafa, Your private viewing of Borat, Ali G, and Bruno, Curated by Tejpal Singh Ajji, Justina M Barnicke Gallery, Toronto November 16–December 30, 2007

Jon DAVIES holds an MA in film and video, critical and historical studies, from York University in Toronto. His writing has been published in such periodicals as GLQ, Animation Journal, C Magazine, Canadian Art, Cinema Scope and Xtra!. He has also curated film and video for several venues including Pleasure Dome and Gallery TPW, and is currently working on a major exhibition of work by Colin Campbell for the Oakville Galleries that will open in December 2008.



■ Bernard MARCADÉ, *Marcel Duchamp, la vie à crédit*. Éd. Flammarion, Coll. Grandes Biographies, Paris, 2007, 596 pages. Ill. n/b.

Critique d'art et commissaire d'expositions — il a co-organisé *Féminin – Masculin, le sexe de l'art* qui eut lieu en 1995 au Centre Georges Pompidou —, Bernard Marcadé est également l'auteur de quelques essais dont *Il n'y a pas de second degré. Remarques sur la figure de l'artiste au XX^e siècle* (Éd. J. Chambon, 1999). Cet énorme bouquin consacré à la vie de Marcel Duchamp nous semblait donc de bon augure. Il y a, en effet, dans ce genre nommé biographie, des ouvrages qui suscitent l'intérêt parce qu'ils arrivent à doser la part d'anecdotes à propos de la vie d'un individu. Mais, dans le cas de Duchamp, Marcadé n'y parvient qu'à moitié.

Racontée de façon linéaire, cette histoire d'une vie rappelle, au début de chaque chapitre, les dates importantes qui d'année en année ponctuent le temps qui passe : naissance, étude, famille, rencontre, amour, etc. On suit, pas à pas, le parcours de celui qui, né dans une famille d'artistes, cherche à repenser le monde de l'art en dehors de la peinture. Afin de donner vie à cette chronologie, Marcadé raconte en détails les faits, sans doute importants et attrayants, qui soulignent le tempérament du personnage. On assiste ainsi à la vie au quotidien de l'artiste tout en présentant le milieu tout à fait particulier qu'il a fréquenté, autant à Paris qu'à New York. Toutefois, malgré le plaisir que l'on prend à lire toutes ces informations, il manque l'élément unificateur qui donne à une biographie un souffle unique.

Malgré tout, soyons franc : il n'est pas désagréable d'examiner le parcours exceptionnel de Duchamp et de suivre, parallèlement aux

nombreuses anecdotes, le développement de sa pensée eu égard à l'art et à la figure de l'artiste. Trop souvent associé uniquement au *ready made*, il est donc intéressant de pouvoir jeter un regard élargi sur son parcours. C'est que, comme le dit Marcadé, « la vie de Duchamp constitue un témoignage particulièrement éclairant de la vie artistique et intellectuelle du XX^e siècle. » En matière d'avant-garde, il a été un excellent intermédiaire entre l'Europe et l'Amérique. Ami du sculpteur Brancusi, il se fait pour un certain temps son agent et contribue ainsi à le faire connaître aux U.S.A. En somme, l'artiste qu'il est ne tourne pas le dos entièrement au milieu de l'art, bien au contraire. Il inaugure, par sa personnalité, une nouvelle posture artistique où c'est l'artiste lui-même qui devient œuvre d'art.

Bref, ce que nous rappelle essentiellement cette biographie, c'est que Duchamp a vécu selon une « philosophie » inspirée par le scepticisme de Pyrrhon. Cette compréhension du monde qui passe par le doute et la liberté d'indifférence lui a permis de demeurer désengagé des mouvements auxquels il a pourtant participé. C'est par ce retrait volontaire qu'il a pu faire de l'emploi de son temps ce qui, toute sa vie, a été le plus cher à ses yeux.

André-Louis Paré

LIVRES ET DOCUMENTS REÇUS

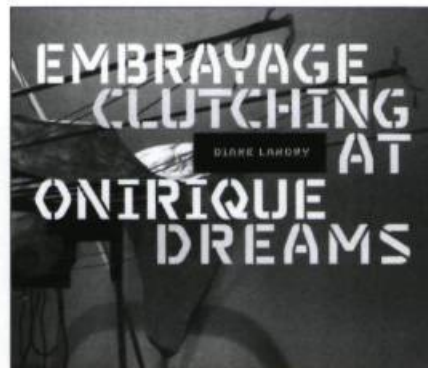


■ Philip MONK, *Disassembling the Archive: Fiona Tan*. © Philip Monk et la Art Gallery of York University, 2007. s. p. www.yorku.ca/agyv Fort beau visuellement, le document (en anglais) constitue le catalogue de l'exposition tenue du 26 janvier au 26 mars 2006 à l'Art Gallery of York University, à Toronto. Élaboré sous

forme de correspondance « presque fictionnelle » de l'auteur adressée à l'artiste entre le 2 septembre 2006 et le 2 septembre 2007, il questionne l'identité post-coloniale que l'on retrouve dans le travail de Fiona Tan et, dès lors, les implications sur l'archivage photographique et la mouvance des images.



■ Kristan HORTON, *Dr. Strangelove, Dr. Strangelove*. © Kristan Horton et l'Art Gallery of York University, 2007. s. p. www.yorku.ca/agyv Constitué de magnifiques photographies n/b, ce livre d'artiste accompagnait l'exposition qui s'est tenue du 25 avril au 24 juin 2007, sous le commissariat d'Emelie Chhangur et Philip Monk. L'artiste y « reconstruit » le film (en français : *Docteur Folamour*), en juxtaposant à des images du film des photographies réalisées à partir de matériaux qu'il a sous la main.



■ Diane LANDRY, *Embrayage onirique/Clutching at Dreams*. © Oboro & Two Rivers Gallery. 61 pages. www.oboro.net / www.two-riversartgallery.com / <http://diane-landry.com>

Accompagnée d'un DVD et abondamment illustrée, la publication a pour origine une commande d'œuvres qu'Oboro a lancée à l'artiste en 2004. Des essais sont signés Peggy Gale et George Harris.