

Unendurable Boredom Not Part of This Video Show

VISUAL ARTS

Mike MacDonald

Secret Flowers.

Cornelia Wyngaarden

Forged Subjectivity.

New video art at Presentation House Gallery until May 30

• BY ROBIN LAURENCE

Art video has had to fight a long, bad rap as a medium of unendurable boredom. In its early days, defining itself in opposition to television meant repudiating all of TV's fast, slick, and zippy strategies—i.e., all those qualities that make TV so compelling. The result was an art of almost catatonic artlessness, guaranteeing the video maker's political integrity and the video viewer's complete lack of interest.

Not so now. Attitudes have shifted and techniques have been radically refined. Witness the work of two of Vancouver's foremost video artists, Corry Wyngaarden and Mike MacDonald. Both have both found ways of enlarging video's creative possibilities without resorting to television's crassly commercial bag of tricks. MacDonald employs complexly choreographed imagery on a 16-screen video wall; Wyngaarden also uses multiple screens, situating her video monitors within an installation that includes backlit photo-transparencies, paintings, medical artifacts, text, and audiotapes.

MacDonald, who is of Micmac and Beothuk as well as European descent, has become closely identified with Native issues, especially as they coincide with environmental concerns. Implicit in his most recent work, *Secret Flowers*, is the use of rare and endangered indigenous plants as a metaphor for the cultural practices of indigenous peoples. MacDonald's video-wall functions as a silently shifting mosaic of "ethnobotanical" expression, evoking



Cornelia Wyngaarden's Forged Subjectivity uses multiple screens, photo-transparencies, paintings, medical artifacts, and text to deliver a fictionalized biography of cross-dressing Member of Parliament John White, née Eliza McCormick.

the connection between sensitive ecosystems and Native ways of life.

Each monitor is filled with a different close-up shot of wild flowers, berries, leaves, or branches, many of them gently swaying and bobbing in the wind. Every 30 seconds or so, mass edits occur and the video mosaic is differently configured. So mesmerizing is the effect of all the intricate forms, exquisite colours, and subtle movements that you almost forget you are sitting in a gallery. You almost smell the coastal forests and alpine meadows; you almost hear the wind in the trees and the drone of the nectar-foraging bees that bumble into view after a few image shifts. A few more shifts, and the bees are replaced by a substantial array of butterflies and moths, fluttering, stepping, and sip-

ping around the rare blossoms—cross-pollinating and playing the complex roles assigned to them by nature.

With the next edit, though, the idyllic mood of the piece changes: the butterflies are usurped by DC-6s dropping insecticide over a sleeping Vancouver. (Yup, it's Agriculture Canada's controversial BTK war against the Asian gypsy moth.) The final bank of shots is of glass-topped collection boxes, filled with hundreds of dead butterflies and moths. Neatly sorted and compartmentalized, the flattened insects mutely deplore the indiscriminate effects of BTK, the collecting and categorizing compulsions of Western science, and the more generalized extermination of rare plant and animal species through reckless human greed.

In putting this review together, I felt a very powerful urge to name the flowers and plants that MacDonald has recorded in his video trips into the wild. I love to make lists, and I wanted to reel off beautiful-sounding words like fireweed and shooting star, monkey flower and lady's slipper, dryas and cinquefoil and saxifrage and bergamot. But at the same time, MacDonald's video made me realize that naming is a form of claiming, a form of colonizing. Through language, we culturally inscribe our world, establishing classificatory systems by which we can control and ultimately exploit nature and each other. Hardly appropriate to the values expressed in *Secret Flowers*.

A parallel naming and classifying compulsion is challenged in Wyngaarden's *Forged Subjectivity*—the compul-

sion to identify and institutionalize sexual difference and perpetuate gender roles. Through a reconstruction of the life of 19th-century Canadian blacksmith and foundry owner John White, Wyngaarden seeks to undermine masculinist and heterosexist biases in the writing of history. White is an exemplary subject: born Eliza McCormick, s/he was elected to the Canadian House of Commons as a man and maintained the cross-dressing deception through some 17 sessions of Parliament and on until death.

Cross-dressing, transvestism, transsexualism, homosexuality—all are highly disturbing to a society invested in its own orders of privilege and exclusion based on notions of "difference". Wyngaarden uses White's life as an occasion to examine the omission of cross-dressed women and lesbians from our histories, and to review Victorian concepts of "womanliness", especially as they intersected with arguments for and against universal suffrage. The construction of a gendered identity is analogized through images of and references to masquerade, measurement, tailoring, forging (as in both "smithing" and "faking"), amputation, law, medicine, and literature. Susanna Moodie's semi-autobiographical novel, *Flora Lyndsay*, is cited, both in wall-mounted text and on audiotape. (Moodie was a neighbour of John White; *Flora Lyndsay* raises gender role issues.)

As with the construction of the self, Wyngaarden's installation is a complex synthesis of elements, images, impulses, and conditions. Like MacDonald, Wyngaarden manages to be highly politicized without resorting to didacticism. In both video works, technical mastery is tempered with great humanity. ■

Mike MacDonald will give a talk on endangered plant species and butterfly gardening on Sunday, May 30, at 3 p.m., at Presentation House.

Venice Biennale John McEwen Faye HeavyShield Vikky Alexander

CANADIAN

ART

Ydessa Hendeles

A Toronto Collector's
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Contemporary Art
by Richard Rhodes

**Canada's
New Rothko**
by John
Bentley Mays

**Dorothea
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A Canadian
Star Shines
in New York
by Murray
Pomerance

**The Crisis
of Abstraction**
Revisiting the Fifties
by Robert Fulford

Display until Dec. 21



Fall 1993 Volume 10 Number 3 \$6.00

Reviews

VANCOUVER

**Cornelia Wyngaarden:
Forged Subjectivity**
Mike MacDonald: Secret Flowers
Presentation House Gallery

Video and video installation may no longer be the *enfants terribles* of Canadian art. Now firmly established as marginal, the medium of video continues to draw its aura from its ability to explore personal and subjective stories and their politics in the face of the information industry's campaign to turn us all into consumer slaves. Cornelia Wyngaarden and Mike MacDonald, who recently showed their work concurrently at Presentation House, are two Vancouver artists who have had reputations since the 1980s for

using video as a kind of alternative documentary. In recent years, both have been working in video installation. This shift has been, in part, a capitulation to the reality that their work is shown in galleries and not on broadcast television.

Wyngaarden's *Forged Subjectivity* was a multimedia installation in which video played the dominant role. In an orange-walled gallery she exhibited two vitrines, each holding two pre-World War I bone saws used in amputations, as well as five backlit Cibachromes, some of

DNA molecules, others of nineteenth-century tailor's patterns. On the wall she displayed a text from Susanna Moodie's semi-autobiographical novel, *Flora Lyndsay*, as well as two paintings: a nineteenth-century portrait of a middle-class woman, and a pastiche of the same painting showing the sitter transformed into a man.

The video component was presented in two parts. An upended monitor near the entrance showed tapes of a woman in male drag metamorphosing into a dressmaker's dummy. Inside, a row of five monitors showed, among other things, images of old iron forges and railways and text drawn from nineteenth-century writings on the nature of women. The voice-over component of the

installation was drawn from the parliamentary speeches of John White, MP for East Hastings, Ontario (1871-1887). John White was born a female, Eliza McCormick, but lived adult life as a man. The installation's pairings and nineteenth-century references turned on this self-constructed double identity, but the end result was neither a history lesson nor a biography. The images in *Forged Subjectivity* were very evocative. Wyngaarden is at her strongest when she pushes metaphor, suggesting the interconnectedness and the gendered aspects of just about everything. But she risks overwhelming the viewer with too much information. Nonetheless, the installation had a deep emotional resonance.

Mike MacDonald's installation *Secret Flowers* was, in contrast, a very straightforward affair. A video wall presented a sequence of images from flowers, to butterflies and flowers, to aerial spray bombing (a reference to last summer's controversial spraying of Vancouver for gypsy moths) and finally to butterflies pinned in rows in specimen cases. The flowers are all indigenous to B.C. This artist has elsewhere stated his resolve to raise awareness about the relationship between culture and nature, suggesting an analogy between the colonization of First Nations peoples and the erasure of one kind of ecology for the sake of another. Disarmingly simple and as extraordinarily pretty as a *National Geographic* nature documentary, *Secret Flowers* managed to drop ironic depth charges. At stake are ways of knowing the world, some of which, we realize now, destroy the very things we seek to know.
Scott Watson

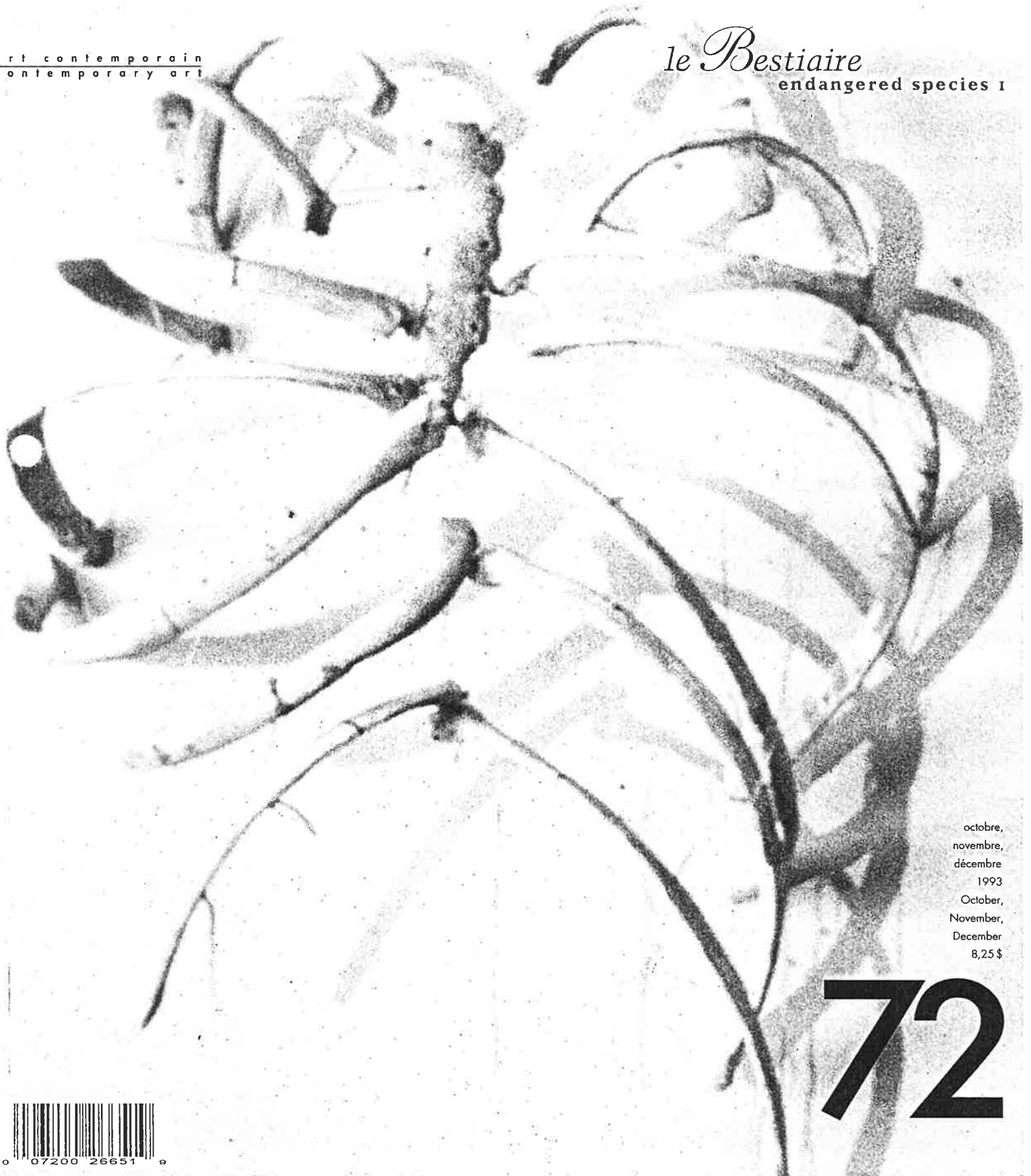


Mike MacDonald
Secret Flowers 1993
Video installation
Courtesy: Presentation House Gallery

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critics, curators and editors. As Victor Burgin succinctly writes in *The End of Art Theory*: "No matter that the work does not sell . . . lecture fees and airplane ticket will be generated, and if enough critical writing is produced . . . [an] Arts grant may be forthcoming."

The work's real or authoritative value is not obtained through cardboard or even steel, but as a disordered commodity. Carl's entanglement with layers of authority establishes his work as a form of credit within the institution of art. Understand the work within the structure of contemporary capitalism and a credit economy, rather than a commentary on the anachronistic logic of a cash economy (sculpture as coinage, the relative degree of its materiality).

Within this exhibition, the steel dumpster in the alley signifies state authority, the almost claustrophobic weight of the generally invisible grid of social services that support the hidden infrastructure of the city. While the cardboard copy of the disposal unit provides a supple resistance to that authority, it is also collaborative as flesh is to skeleton. It is the nature of this collaboration that its status as commodity is revealed.

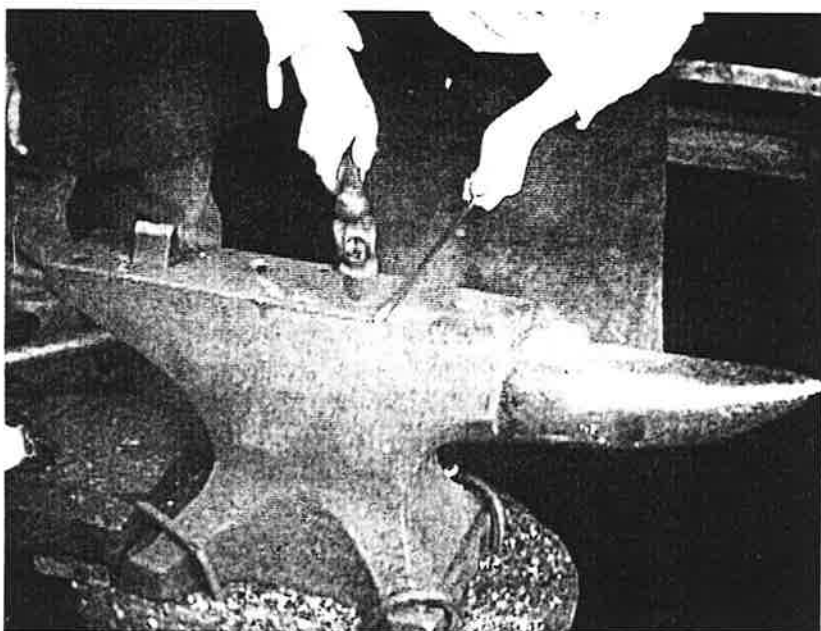
Consider this sculpture as a memorial trope derived from the appearance of the body in a state of rigor mortis. Consider this body decomposing to a skeletal architecture. Understand architecture and sculpture historically conflated in the figurative architecture of the state, the skeleton of the social body, a memorial. The structure of contemporary architecture is steel. Understand the supple flow of commodity as architectural structure: steel as refrigerator and stove, automobile and garbage dumpster, tool or weapon, monument and memorial.

Unlike the cardboard replica "redeemed" in disposal, as if a votive offering, the steel dumpster survives the exhibition, no longer innocent, accused. It waits in the alley behind the gallery, devouring garbage, a huge mandible of a gigantic dispersed skeleton, a gaping mouth on the flowing trough of commodities, which is turned by Carl into metaphor and parody. Carl's temporary reconstruction is a well-crafted body made ironically in the image of the skeleton that supports it.

— ROBIN PECK

CORNELIA WYNGAARDEN

Presentation House Gallery, Vancouver, April 14 - May 30



CORNELIA WYNGAARDEN,
FORGED SUBJECTIVITY,
1992, VIDEO STILL,
PHOTO: CHICK RICE,
COURTESY OF
PRESENTATION HOUSE
GALLERY.

Cornelia Wyngaarden's installations are about gender stereotyping, cultural identities and how they are produced. She has previously stated, "My experience with the world seems to be at vast variance with the official imagery . . ." Consequently her response has been to challenge "official imagery" — as the dominant discourse of white, male, heterosexual culture, which ignores or marginalizes women, lesbians, gays and people of colour — and to establish new representations. *Forged Subjectivity* is a recent multi-media installation by Wyngaarden that continues this process. (It was exhibited in conjunction with *Secret Flowers*, a sixteen-monitor video installation by Mike MacDonald that documented endangered native plant species of B.C.)

Consisting of video and audio elements, photo-transparencies, display cases of amputation saws, two paintings and wall-mounted text, the installation is an elaborate orchestration of appropriated/hijacked historical and artist-produced documentation.

The videos on six monitors provide a wide variety of seemingly disparate images. At the entrance to the gallery, a single monitor shows a video of a woman actor playing Eliza McCormick, a cross-dresser who, under the alias of John White, was elected to Parliament in the late 1800s and served as a member of the Conservative party for seventeen sessions. The actress is dressed

in a Victorian suit and either wears a false beard and mustache or has one overlaid through image manipulation. The other five monitors along the gallery wall show videos of tightly cropped repeating images: a blacksmith's hands at work, train rails, a steel forge, undulating shots of microfiche text from Parliamentary minutes and the woman in disguise.

Echoing the binary codes of the transvestite are two paintings hung on the wall opposite the video monitors. One is a naive, early Canadian portrait of a woman — presumably representing McCormick. The other is a recent painting of the same subject as a man. They are painted in a similar manner and share the same pose and expression.

On the adjoining wall hang five ciba-transparencies. Three images are tailor's cutting patterns and are labeled "chimera," "radical thief" and "masquerade" in large upper-case letters. The remaining panels are electron-microscopic photographs of chromosomes titled "witness" and "evidence." Situated nearby in Plexiglas cases are amputation saws on loan from the British Columbia Medical Association and the North Shore Museum. The remaining wall displays a quotation, from Susanna Moodie's novel *Flora Lyndsay*, and is accompanied by an audio-tape of a woman reading.

These material and conceptual complexities of the installation lure the viewer into participating in a ritualized procession, as if in a museum, examining one archival proof after another. The examination route follows the painted yellow-orange walls of the gallery.

The installation can be read as a historic narrative, a rewriting of a woman's history, were it not for the fragmentation and ironic ambiguity of the elements in the installation that destabilize the McCormick narrative/biography. The work's critique of history and the presentation of an alternative cultural identity in opposition to the entrenched narrative of historic texts gives way to more complex and layered questions about authority and objectivity, not only in history, but in language, art and science.

The single monitor — which shows an actress as McCormick

masquerading as White – at the gallery entrance is the starting point to decipher Wyngaarden's allegorical message. It provides the initial reference that women assume the role of the subject in history by adopting gender traits of men, for example George Sand, George Eliot or the complete masquerade such as McCormick. This cross-dressing, the image of the transvestite, overloads language. Over-gendered, McCormick holds both masculine and feminine traits and becomes she/he. De-gendered, McCormick denies sexual definition/resolution and becomes it.

This persona is not permitted to crystallize but draws on another subtext. The layering of impersonation – the actress playing the actor – draws the work into another dispute. What cultural apparatus holds the authority or the objectivity to determine gender and identity – i.e., as the subject within discourse?

The multiplicity of these readings are reinforced by other video elements. The close-up shots of the rails, the blacksmith's hands, the steel forge and the audio-text are decontextualized and, in their ambiguity, become both critical and celebratory. In emphasizing the selectivity of history, through video-induced claustrophobia, while concurrently removing the activity from masculine stereotyping, the shots of the forges and smithing are visual puns on the forgery that Wyngaarden identifies as an element of her own work.

This testing of authority/identity is clearly articulated by the coupling of the paintings. The remake disrupts the archival stability of the nineteenth-century painting. The fake becomes equally authentic, but then suspicion spills over into the other elements. The viewer can only conclude that the installation provides a game of fraud, deception and interference, and in doing so, throws its interpretation into crisis.

The ciba-transparencies of genetic codes and cutting patterns break away from the historical *jeux-de-mots* and act as a theoretical interlude. They attack the question from a different angle – that which is language-based. Juxtaposed with the texts – “chimera,” “radical thief,”

“masquerade,” “witness” and “evidence” – the images suggest that medical and scientific discourse and historical narratives do not allow for any elements of subjectivity to infiltrate. The hybridity and infiltration that is suppressed is aptly described by Audre Lord as an “institutionalized rejection of difference.”

The amputation saws are further reminders of this severance of difference. The exclusion of marginal individuals – those who do not fit into the standard mode, in this case the male politician – is portrayed as a loss from the body politic. Strengthening this sense of loss is a mythological reference; Vulcan, the forger of metal, was missing a limb.

The only exception to the extroverted and expositional nature of the show is the wall-mounted quotation by Moodie, which is accompanied by a speaker at low volume. The audio-tape is the voice of a woman reading from the Victorian novel. The reference to Moodie's novel seems incongruent with the rest of the installation. It is a refuge from the dialectical push and pull of the rest of the installation. Direct and intimate, ears must be placed extremely close to the speaker. But this monologue, in contrast to the rest of the show, does provide a direct contact to nineteenth century herstory/history.

Together the diverse elements of the installation establish that hybridity and infiltration are the means to bring about the fragmentation and deferral of the terms of patriarchy. Through masquerade, the dual components of the language of patriarchy disrupt the hermetic seal and achieve porosity which can be exploited with success. *Forged Subjectivity* is not open to quick interpretation. It is this complexity that is fundamental to the assertive, maverick intent of the work. Built into the complex installation is the very recognition that the binary terms of patriarchy can be brought into conflict but not resolution.

– JAMES-JASON LEE

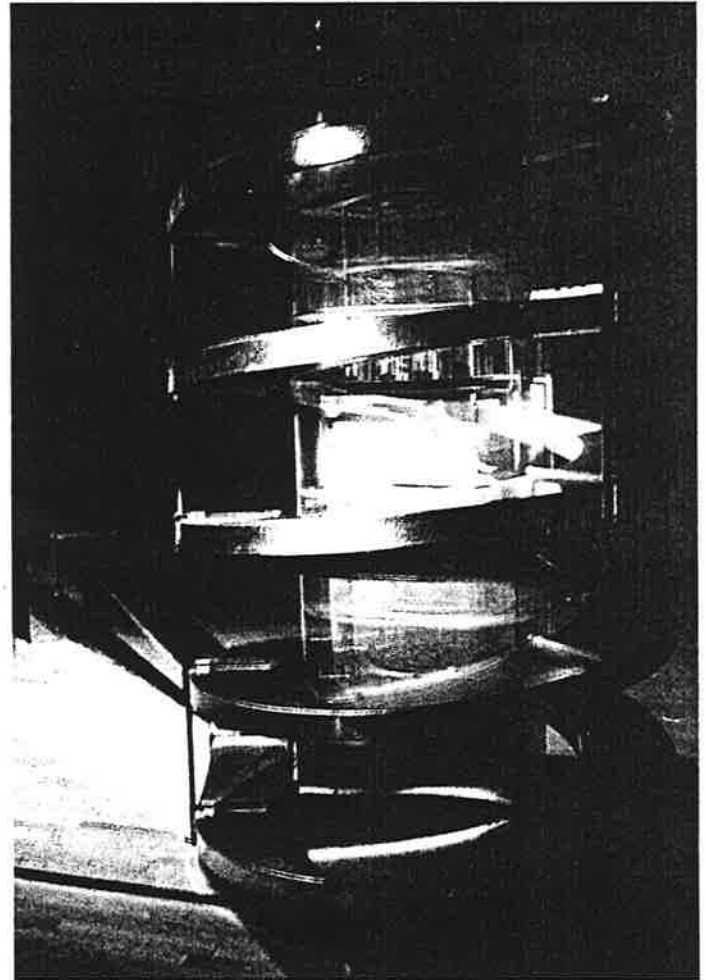
TONY BROWN

Centre national d'art contemporain de Grenoble,
February 20 – April 29

What is the role of cultural production in reinterpreting the everyday technological condition? How might artistic productions

motion-detection cell, blowing a breeze smoothly over their body.

The interaction between the body and technology has been a



TONY BROWN, FREE FALL, 1993, INSTALLATION VIEW; STEEL, ALUMINUM, PLEXIGLAS, INDUSTRIAL FAN; PHOTO: EDUARDO AQUINO.

intervene into the rapport between commercial technologies and the consumer?

Tony Brown's exhibition was a site for such experimentations. *Wind Machine* (1992), an architectural structure spanning nine meters, commanded attention not only because of its impressive scale, but through the continual sound of industrial ventilators. Two steel ducts connected to the ventilators guided wind towards a curved, Plexiglas corridor. Air pressure built up in this segment and was released as someone neared an electronic

constant element in Brown's work:

I am not interested in technology systems because of their technological potential . . . [Technology] functions to elicit the moment between the potential forces of extreme control and violent collapse . . . to create gaps in consciousness – alternate psychological arenas delineated in direct contrast to those of the world.

The two-way, mirrored doors of *Wind Machine* reflected both the gallery space and the visitor, incorporating its own image and that of an adjacent piece. Since observers activated the piece, the artist had