

COURT HOUSE

VERNACULAR MODES OF INQUIRY:
ARTISTS' PROJECTS
AND DISCUSSIONS

NOVEMBER 25 - 27, 2005



Old Kamloops Court House Hostel
Kamloops, British Columbia

Court House Foreword

Court House brings together four artists' projects (by Panya Clark Espinal, David Hoffos, Ernie Kroeger, and Donald Lawrence) in the context of presentations and discussions involving participants coming from such disciplines as Cultural Theory, English and Philosophy. Collectively, this research group is exploring the notion of Vernacular Modes of Artistic Inquiry: the manner in which an individual's (or a group's) localized manners of expression come to be recognized against some larger cultural or political context.

If, as Glen Lowry contends in his review of *PhotoGraphic Encounters* (an exhibition guest curated by myself and W.F. Garrett-Petts at the Kamloops Art Gallery in 2002), the vernacular is articulated at the moment of performance—is always in flux—then we might say, as many in this group or artists and thinkers works seems to suggest, that questions of Illusion and Reality, and of Home and the Homely are actively linked to the contingencies of Remembering and Forgetting, and the flows of time they involve.

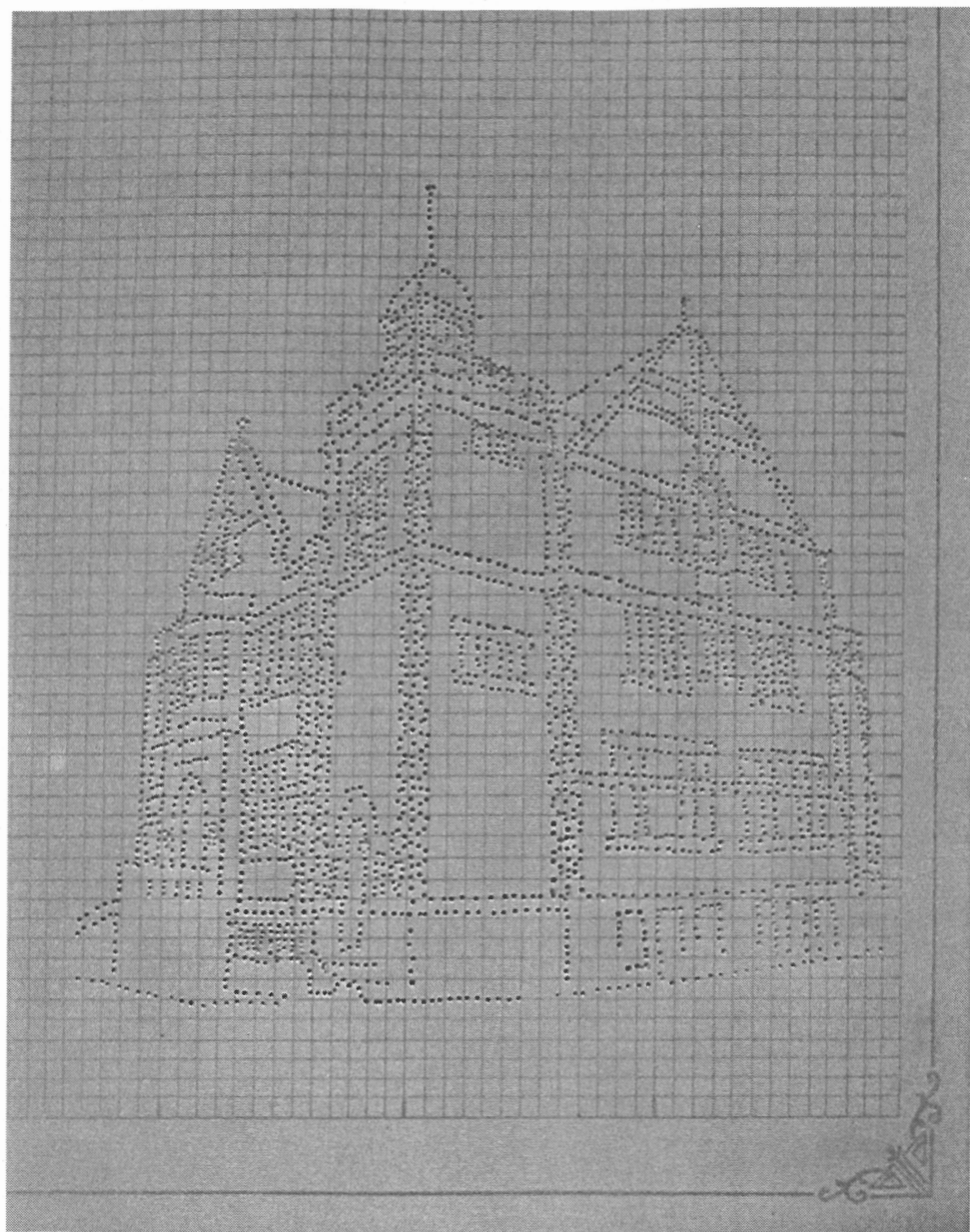
Thus, the Court House project has emerged as a means of further exploring these ideas in response to the tangible presence of the artists' projects in a particular space. Many of these ideas developed in the various aspects of this project intersect Celeste Olalquiaga's consideration of nineteenth. century visual culture in *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience*. Her interests in artifice and cultures of display are worked through a questioning of how past events are recalled through memory all the while distinguishing between nostalgia and melancholy, in which the former is a longing for an unrealizable past and the latter is a meaningful redeeming of the past for the present.

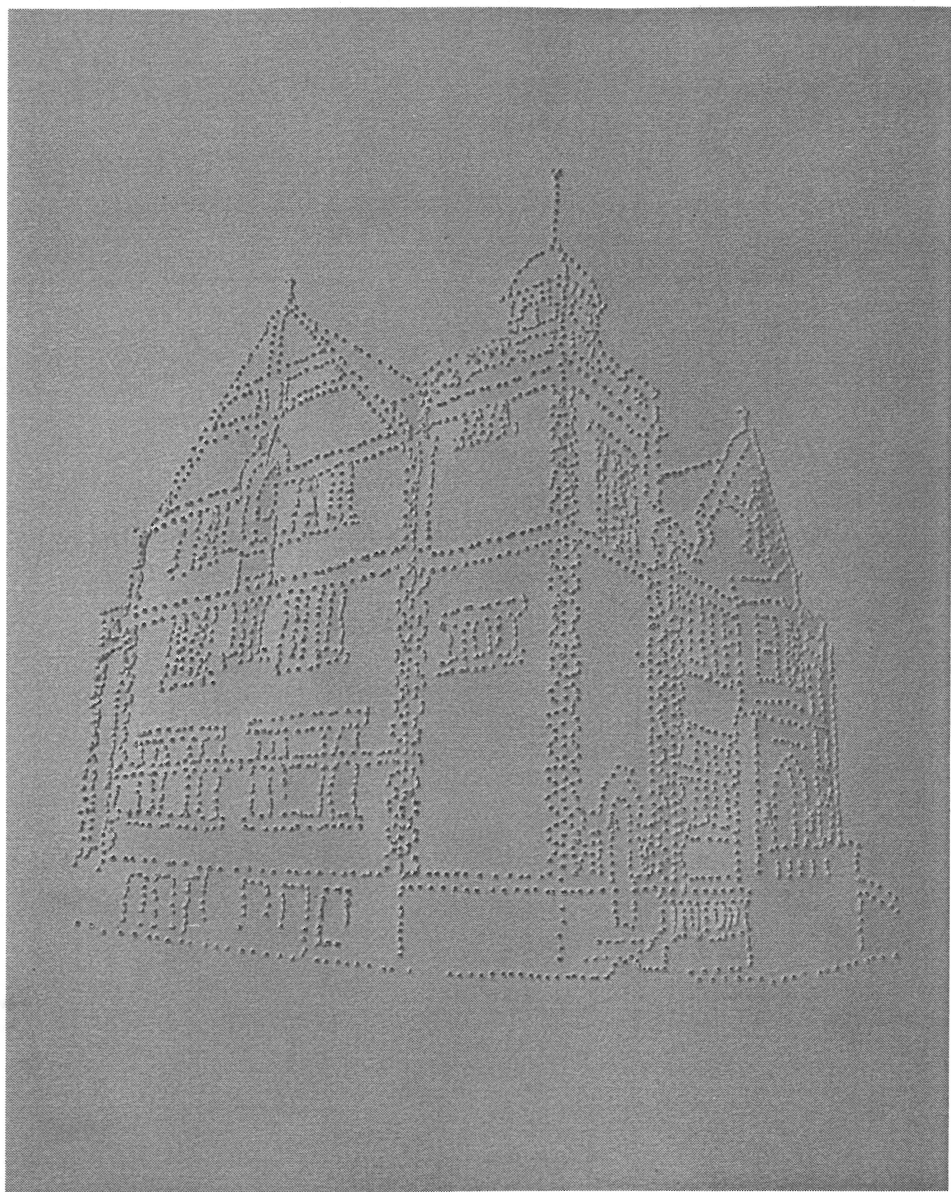
These artists' projects have been created for this venue and, interestingly, each in some respect plays off some idea of water. An interest in water flows throughout *The Artificial Kingdom* and is present also in earlier works by each of the artists. The projects' varied utilization of imagery involving water provides a basis for questioning the relationship between personally invested experience and the broader cultural associations which such imagery often invokes. In his essay Home Thoughts, which has been excerpted throughout this pamphlet, Bruce Baugh takes up some of this discussion in response to what the artists have said of their installations.

Donald Lawrence

Kamloops, BC – November, 2005

The Court House project has been supported by a Research/Creation grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.





Home thoughts

Home is where the heart is
Home is so remote
Home is some emotion
Sticking in my throat
Let's go to your place

Lena Lovich

I. There's No Place Like Home

Home, we are told, is something good and desirable. It's good to "feel at home"; restaurants still (implausibly) advertise "home cooking." For a time, Home was even the brand name of an oil and gas company. Home is a place of comfort and shelter, a place where we "belong," the place we come from ("my home town") and to which we long to go back, our place of origin, the site of our deepest and earliest memories. Like Dorothy, we are all taught that if we ever go looking for our heart's desire, we shouldn't look any further than our own back yard: "There's no place like home."

What if, to reverse the cliché, home is like no place? It is not a place anyone has ever lived, but an ideal place, a no-place, a u-topia. At a certain level, we sense the falsity of the images of home concocted by Norman Rockwell's pictures, Disney movies, and Frank Capra films like *It's a Wonderful Life*—not to mention the architectural pornography of the myriad "house and home" magazines, whose "homes" resemble real homes about as much as the "women" depicted in *Playboy* resemble real women. And yet because these images teach us that this fictional "home" is our heart's desire, we believe in this

myth. We feel deprived of the comfort of a home that never was, estranged from our real home by an imaginary ideal of what home should be. It is as if our homes are haunted by an ideal double: Home itself, the very model of hominess, the essence of Home. "Home" is more ghost, more revenant, than real; the "home" we seek in our homes is never found, but hovers on the margins, an unseen presence, an uncanny double of the streets and houses where we live. It is no wonder that the movies and other media that purvey images of Home are imbued with nostalgia: the home we long for is an ideal past that never was, an irrecoverable loss because, contrary to the cliché, you can lose what you never had (but you can never get it back). To go home at all is to return to that never-never-land, to go home again; and this time the cliché is right: you can't go home again.

As early as his 1920 *Theory of the Novel*, the Hungarian critic and philosopher Goerg Lukács reflected on the "transcendental homelessness" of modern life. In his major work, *Being and Time* (1927), the German philosopher Martin Heidegger traced the not-at-home-ness or uncanniness (*Unheimlichkeit*) of existence to the dominance in modern life of the impersonal authority of the anonymous "One" or "They" (*das Man*), the rule of "public opinion" (which is no one's in particular and everyone's in general) and other impersonal norms governing conduct and values. When "they" determine what "home" is and what it should be, it is no wonder that human existence is "not at home" (*nicht zu Hause*). But, Heidegger adds, we are so entranced by the endless activities and sheer busy-ness required to achieve some approximation of this illusory "home" that we scarcely notice our homelessness or the uncanny, not-at-homeness of our actual lives, which have been scripted by the They's impersonal societal norms rather than authored by the

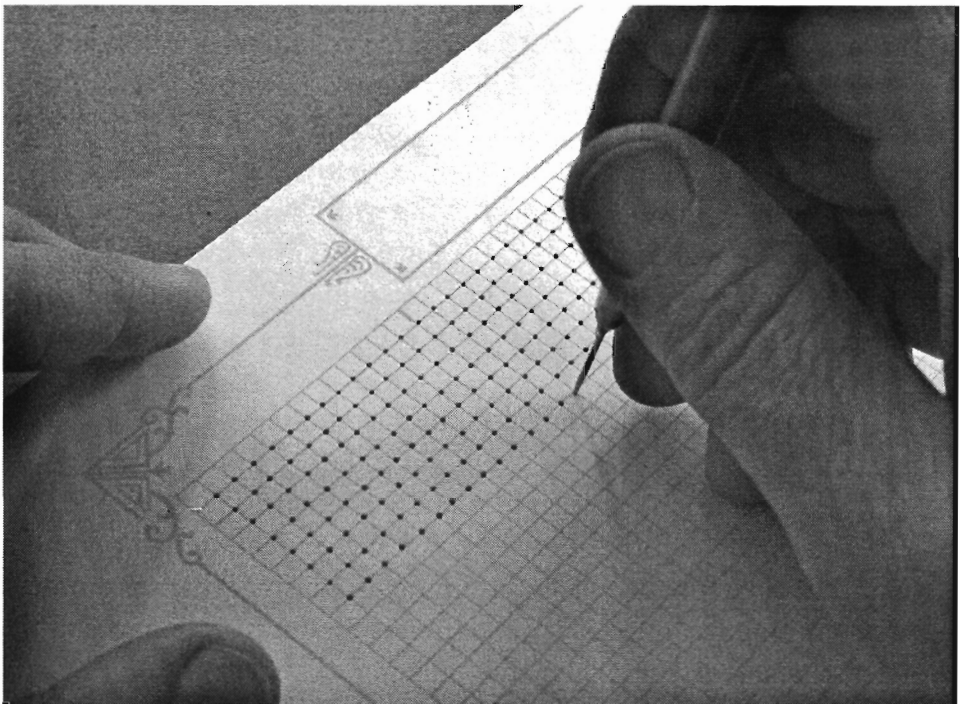
individuals living them. Only in privileged moments of anxiety does the “nothing” looming behind our scripted lives and manufactured desires break through the surface, and fill us with uneasiness.

Uneasiness, uncanniness, doubleness, the uneasiness that lies just below the surface: these haunt the works gathered together in this exhibition. Each work unsettles, and confronts us with the realization that things are not as they seem—that “home” may not be where we think it is, and that it is something other than we’d imagined. Beneath the surface, monsters lurk, or worse: nothing. Upon the moving surface of the deceptively clear waters, images play, whether cultural clichés or personal, photographic memories. In all, there is a tension between surface and depth, between what is revealed and what is hidden, between the clear stream of consciousness and Lethe’s river of forgetfulness, between the coercive and anonymous norms inhabiting our images and desires and our actual experience. Not that these works break through illusions to arrive at the truth; the disillusionment is that even when we discard some of the illusions foisted on us by the culture at large, our notion of what is “real” is based on other illusions.

II. Ideal and Real, Bauhaus and Our House: Clark Espinal

This tension between ideal and experience, between one modern illusion and another, between past and present, runs through Panya Clark Espinal’s work. The entertainment industry, which promotes the consumption of unnecessary and useless products and images in the relentless and yet strangely “tranquilizing” (Heidegger) round of earning and buying that constitutes so much of suburban and urban life, is confronted with the purity and simplicity of the toys and activities devised by Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), the inventor of the

kindergarten. As the inventor of the kindergarten as a place for young children to develop their cognitive and creative abilities through play, Froebel is part of the nineteenth-century movement which created childhood as a separate and relatively privileged stage of life. Without this realm of childhood as a place of play—and hence a place of the consumption of leisure goods such as playthings, toys and entertainment—there would be no frenetic consumerism of the sort promoted by Disney and Toys ‘R’ Us.



But Froebel himself was a modernist-purist: the toys in his kindergarten used simple geometrical forms (likes sticks and blocks) and required active manipulation in a program of “self-active learning,” rather than the passive sensorial bombardment from the Disney factory; the aim of his activities for children was “the production of the beautiful, not only by [the child’s] own activity, but by his own invention” (Wiebe 1892).

Modernist architects such as Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright passed through Froebel-inspired kindergartens, where they learned to love the austere purity of form; Clark Espinal’s parents, both modernist architects, imparted this same love to her. In Clark Espinal’s Froebel-inspired work, we witness a “return” to purity and simplicity, which is also a “return” to an imagined innocence of childhood. Clark Espinal’s work, consisting of images created by making pin-holes or pricks on a grid, is based on an exercise Froebel devised to develop the creative and artist sensibilities of children through “education or play” and which Froebel and his followers called “gifts,” because through them the child could be given (back) to herself. The book from which this “gift” is taken is entitled *Paradise of Childhood*: a paradise lost, of course, a past that is inaccessible and irrecoverable because it was never really present—at every moment, even of childhood, it is the lost innocence of just a moment ago or “once upon a time,” a dreamed or imagined past. In effect, then, Clark Espinal’s work confronts the consumerist present with an ideal past: the past that should have been, and that perhaps will be in a time to come, an untimely past which can perhaps free us from the real past’s constraints and for a new future in which work and play coincide. The ideal and imagined past is also a lost possibility that stands before us as utopian future which haunts the present.

Even more unsettling is the realization that the passive consumerism of modern suburbia's actual present is perfectly "at home" in the utopian future of modernism: the frantic busyness of consumerist activity dwells comfortably in the many suburban houses that owe so much to Wright and Gropius, and to their teacher, Froebel. This is not just a fact of the culture we live in; it is the invasion of Clark Espinal's own living room, through the agency of her children's consumption, a role made possible, ironically, by the movement that freed children from work and for "learning" and leisure—the movement in which Froebel played such a key role. Froebel's ideal paradise is the "fallen" consumerist world. In Clark Espinal's images, this reversibility of values becomes visible: the "front" of the image created by pinpricks also has its "negative" reverse side of raised bumps, creating the same pattern in reverse; the dark pinpoint can become points of light against dark ground through a change in the lighting. Front is back, dark is light, positive is negative, the past's dreamed-of and ideal future is the real present. Of course this is incongruous, and that's also why it's both humorous and unsettling.

Clark Espinal's work thereby attempts to use this incongruity to wrest her life-narrative from the one dominated by the anonymous They—a move toward the personal, or toward the authentic, in Heidegger's words, and also an instance of Froebel's thesis that ideas which do not originate through one's own experience and mental activity "are simply the consent of the mind to the ideas of others." Yet it is not (as is often the case in Heidegger-inspired art) a "heroic" move, which challenges the everyday from a higher place (a lost tradition, an ideal). It is mock-heroic, and challenges the everyday with the everyday: one facet of the everyday (modernist purism) with another (hand-crafted images such as a kindergartner could make); the "universal" vernacular of consumer culture and high modernism with

a personal vernacular constructed from personally selected bits and pieces of the universal. Such bricolage is not sublime or tragic irony, but humour: the presentation of an incongruity surpassed through laughter (however nervous).

The bricolage of pure form and consumerist waste is most evident in Clark Espinal's use of materials. A video image of water running down a drain, in a vortex or whirlpool, where the circular drain at the bottom of the tub sometimes seems to rise to the surface of the water which is about to flow down through it, becomes, through a further reversal from positive to negative such that the dark spots and stains on the tub's surface become tiny white points of light, the spiral galaxy of stars. From water down the drain—the descent into the maelstrom—comes a spiralling to “the starry heaven” of night that fills the soul with wonder. All of these beautiful forms and sublime movements are played out on a silver screen made of the foil inner liners of tetrapack Rice Dream containers which have been cut open and sewn together, the very antithesis of the sublimity of spiral galaxies and maelstroms. The shock of the incongruity between the ideal and the everyday is disquieting and humorous, like seeing a philosopher gazing at the heavens tumble into a ditch (or a bathtub): the indignity of such a fall is at odds with the dignity of thought that led to it.

III. Drowning on Dry Land: Lawrence's Archipelago

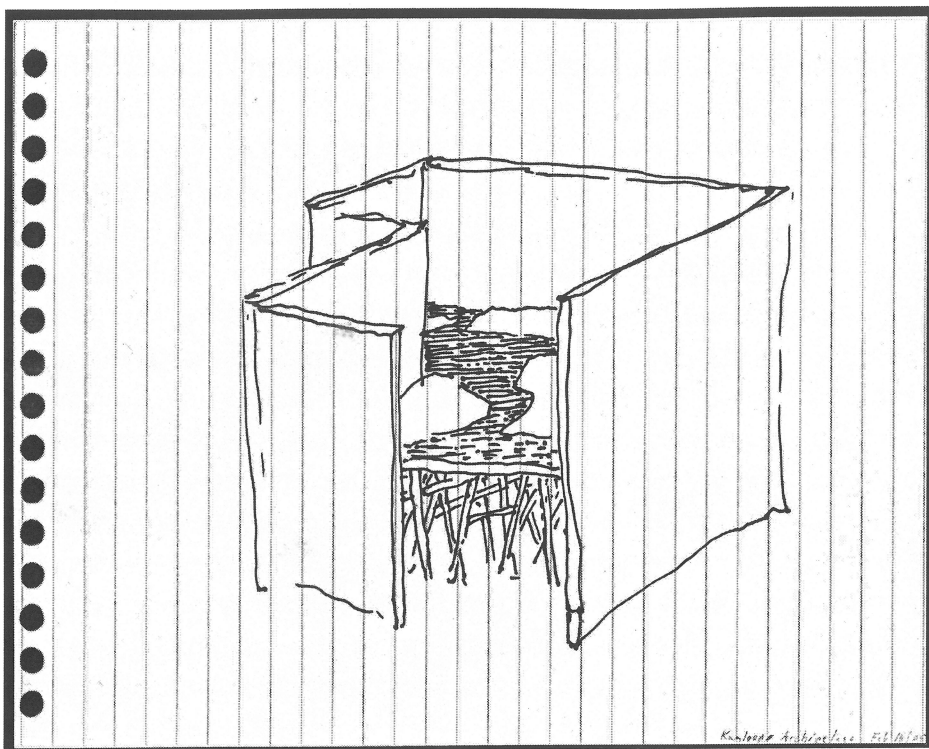
Humorous incongruity also runs through Donald Lawrence's Kamloops Archipelago, a room-sized representation of how Kamloops might have looked 250 million years ago, when the Kamloops area was mostly covered by ocean, with islands jutting through at the highest points of what today are mountains. Instead of the arid desert we see today, a submarine, aquatic world was the environment of Kamloops' original denizens. This world, although vanished, persists as a primordial past, as an unconscious stratum of the hills and rivers of 2005. It is as if Kamloops today were floating uneasily on a hidden ocean that constitutes its true and original nature, and which could rise up and engulf it, as the rising ocean is swallowing up Vanuatu in the South Pacific: what lies on the surface is menaced by the depths of a volcanic and Plutonian sea, and what seems stable is threatened with impermanence. But the past that threatens to engulf the present both was (the Kamloops area really was an archipelago surrounded by ocean) and was not (Lawrence's model imagines the past): it is an imaginary-real past, a surreal past in the Surrealists' original sense of a fusion of dream and reality, the "primeval ocean" of art and imagination rather than of geo-history.

In that sense, it is perhaps more primordial than any historical or dateable past: it is the past that was never present but always was, the unconscious past on which the conscious present floats uneasily, haunting from below what emerges above the threshold of conscious awareness, coexisting with the present as its hidden and irrecoverable support, like the past we imagine in dreams to account for what is occurring in the dream's present moment: a fleeting, shadow-past, which can only be sensed, but never seen. In making this unseen

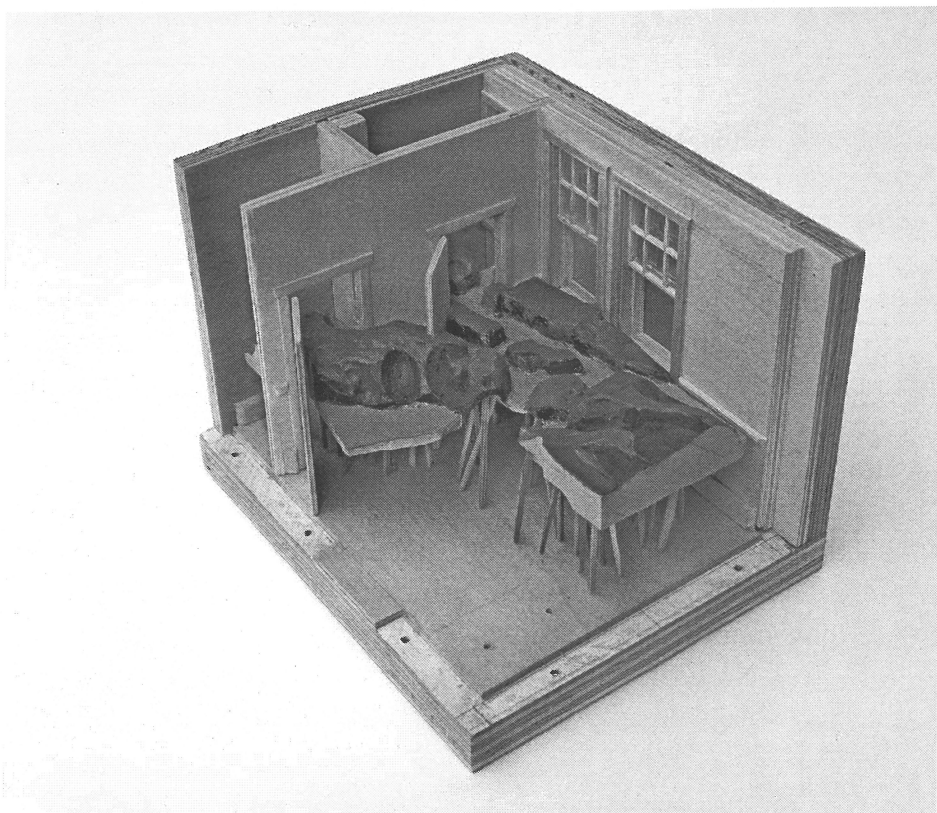
(and strictly speaking: invisible) past seen and present, the Kamloops Archipelago performs the impossible—but an “impossible” that is also, according to philosophers like Deleuze and Lyotard, the highest task of art: harnessing forces, making visible the invisible, allowing us to see or hear what we mostly only inchoately feel or sense.

At the same time, by superimposing this three-dimensional map of the past over the map of the present, the Archipelago “deterritorializes” Kamloops, and sets it adrift from its moorings in the perceptible, visible present. The model Archipelago refers us to a past that lies buried below in the invisible and unknown subterranean remnants of a lost ocean. Above and below, surface and depth, past and present, pass into each other, until it is no longer clear which is which, much as the watery expanses of the Archipelago approximate the present-day rivers separating parts of Kamloops into separate “islands.” The arid present is inhabited by the watery unconscious – “the region of the memory traces of things”—that is, by a “long and copious past... in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away, and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one,” however hidden these may be from the surface of conscious perception (Freud). In the Kamloops Archipelago, this coexistence of past and present, this doubling of one into the other, is set to work and plays itself out before our eyes. A spectre is haunting Kamloops: itself, its own uncanny doppelganger, returning to itself from out of the past. Lawrence’s work bids it welcome.

In doing so, Lawrence, like Clark Espinal, achieves an individualizing or personalizing interpretation of a universal theme or a personal interpretation of a broader narrative: an attempt to rewrite, in one’s own voice, the life-narrative written by the anonymous They, but using the most everyday materials and images, rather than rising



into the sublime or Socratic ironic superiority. Although Lawrence has lived in Kamloops for some sixteen years, this is the first of his works to specifically address the place and landscape of what has become his "home town." Yet the elements he brings to the Archipelago have a long history in his work: the element of the "home-made," using everyday and simple materials, also runs through his works involving kayaks (which included actual kayaks, or their parts, which Lawrence had made) and pinhole photography, and



the element of water and coastlines is present in the kayak works and the pinhole photographs of marine objects. Where Lawrence's previous work deals with the Pacific and Atlantic coasts, the Archipelago brings the ocean to Kamloops itself—and given that Lawrence was largely raised on the Pacific coast, this gesture also amounts to bringing his coastal home “home” to Kamloops, or bringing Kamloops to the coast.

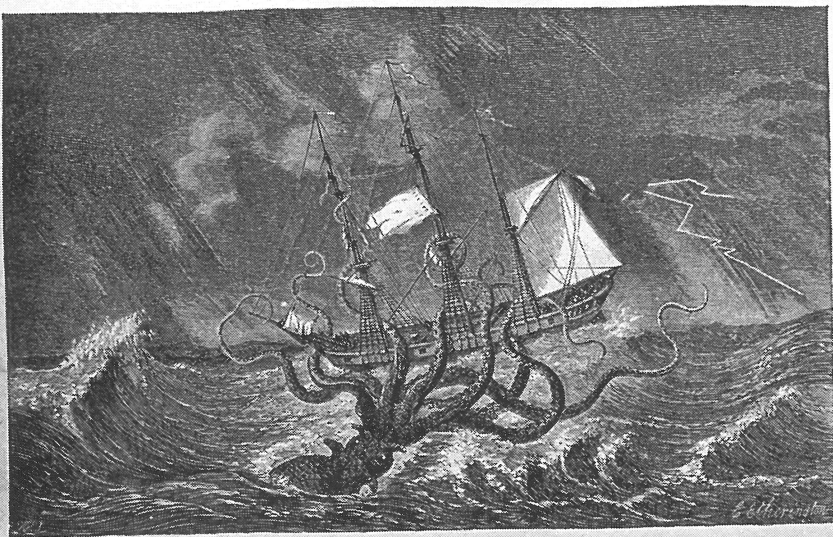
IV. Home is Where the Haunt Is: Hoffos.

Uncanny doppelgangers haunting the cosiest and most domestic home-settings have long been prominent in David Hoffos' work, and the present work is no exception. In the series of works entitled *Scenes From The House Dream*, video images of people are projected onto wooden cut-outs of human figures—some life-size, some miniature—populating the series of scenes with present/absent "ghosts." The characters themselves are often engaged in incomplete and repetitive tasks, such as the image of a woman who smokes and drinks, changes the t.v. channel, and puts on her robe, or of another who sweeps a floor with a broom: this is motion as stasis, motion that is not going anywhere, caught in a kind of hell of waiting, where this time it is the future—cut off, inaccessible—that haunts the present. Genuine action requires the actualization of a new future—a movement from what is toward what is not. Like the characters in Sartre's *No Exit*, Hoffos' characters are condemned to be what they have been already, with no possibility of becoming anything else.

Yet there is a future in Hoffos' work, and it's not friendly: it is a vague and present danger. What is particularly under threat is the Home, the sense of the domestic as the heart of heartless conditions, as safe-haven, as the den and nesting place of comfortable family life. In *Scenes from the House Dream*, in one scene, a woman emerges from an Airstream trailer into the night, and fails to see the nearby ghostly apparition; in another, a woman walks the deck of a boat securely moored at a pier, but fails to see the giant squid lurking underwater. In another work, *You Will Remember When You Need to Know*, the very cosiness of home and hearth becomes a source of menace: a model of an affluent, forest suburb (much like Kamloops'

Rose Hill) has houses with windows that illuminated the night with a warm, yellow-orange glow; it is only on closer inspection that it becomes apparent that the glow comes not from lamps or fireplaces, but from the houses being on fire. Home heating oil: warm and cozy, and anxious and uncanny. In rushing to fulfill the dreams and desires instilled in us by the "they," we plunge headlong into our worst nightmare. The menace that haunts comfortable domesticity is there, but never quite grasped: a shadowy presence outside the home, a destructive cosiness within; a murky darkness or a maleficent light.

In his latest work, Hoffos again effects an uncanny haunting of the domestic. A lighthouse, a beacon of warning and yet also of safety, stands on a shoreline at night, as a group of people crowd the beach, while in the distance, an undersea terror—Moby Dick? a giant squid from Twenty-thousand leagues under the sea? it is hard to see in the darkness—rises to the surface. Here, water is a site of human gathering and communication (the lighthouse on the shore), but mostly "home" to that which threatens home: shoals, reefs, rocks, monsters. The depths breed monsters, but we are impelled, like Ahab, to pursue what we fear, and to the point that what we fear and what we are become indistinguishable. What we fear is not so much "the unknown" as the repressed: Hoffos' characters do not just not see the danger lurking below the surface, they do not look, or they even turn away—as if they sense, at a pre-conscious level, the presence of something dangerous or forbidden. This is not simply ignorance; it is what Nietzsche calls "active forgetting." If we remember too much, then we become too aware of the fleetingness and insignificance of existence; we become aware, as Heidegger says, of the Nothing that fills us with anxiety and dread, and which hovers just out of view, or below the surface.



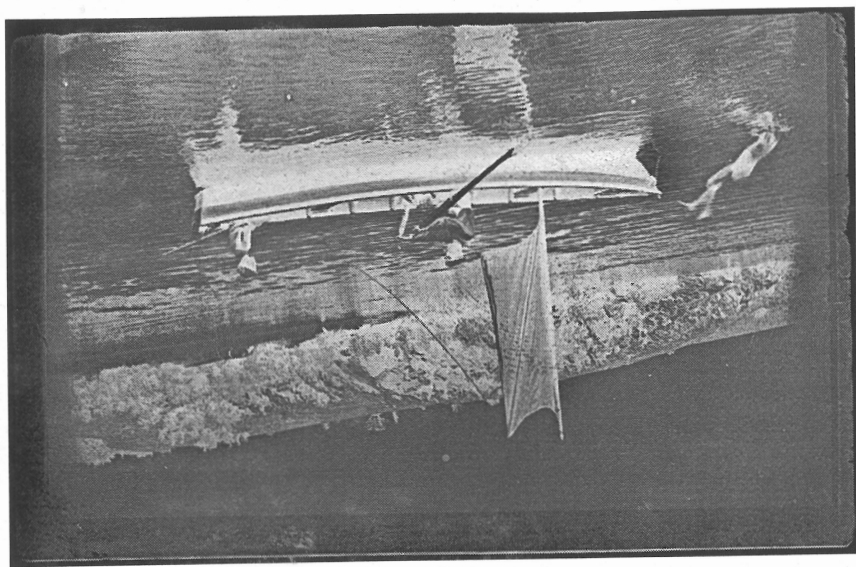
THE KRAKEN, AS SEEN BY THE EYE OF IMAGINATION.

Despite their air of verisimilitude, the ghosts that populate Hoffos' work recede from our grasp like Macbeth's dagger: we are aware that they are illusory, but as Hoffos remarks, "an illusion doesn't really work unless you know that there is an illusion." The spectral, haunting quality of these figures comes not from their being so convincing that we are taken in, but from that little gap between the suspension of disbelief and true conviction: this is the power of the false displaying itself in its falsity, not the cheap fakery of the midway sideshow or of Madame Tussaud's. The play of belief/disbelief, real/imaginary gives each image its doubleness and uncanny effect, its halo of unreality, which would be lost if, like a bunch of rubes, we were entirely deceived by appearances.

Only the disillusion that preserves the illusion as illusion allows us to enjoy the illusion: we're in on the joke, even though we're the butt of it.

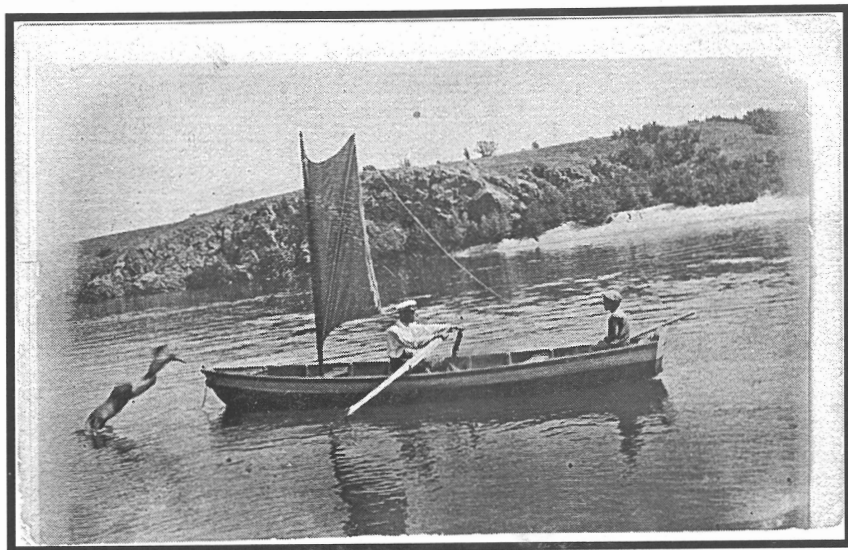
V. The Time-Image: Kroeger

It's harder to laugh when the ghosts are real, as they are in Ernie Kroeger's work, which deals with haunting of another sort. There are several images of time and numbers, some reversible and some not: a number sequence in which the left-hand column runs from 1-84, facing a shorter, right-hand column of numbers from 1-48 (the reverse of 84); number series corresponding to measures of time (days and weeks, minutes and hours, and the fractions of a second used on photography to expose the negative); and a photographic image and its negative, in which left and right, top and bottom in one image is the reverse of the other. All form parts of a meditation on time, memory and loss, with the aim not of "active forgetting," but of the retrieval or search for lost time. For this is a work of mourning: for Kroeger's father, a draftsman who loved counting, numbers and reversing numbers (he would say he was 24 when he was 42)—and who died at age 84 when Kroeger was 48. He is pictured here diving off of the prow of a rowboat into the placid surface of a river in a photograph taken in the U.S.S.R in 1929—a surface which remains a surface, below which there is no depth to be seen, although below the threshold of the surface there are depths to be imagined—as in Lawrence's Archipelago, Hoffos' shoreline and Clark Espinal's reversals of surface and depth in her refracted bathtub bottoms (surfaces). This surface marks both the threshold to an unknown "below" and an unknown "above," for in the negative image, the young (now old and deceased) father-to-be is "diving" upward



from below and into an equally impassable surface, which we believe his head penetrates, although we see only its absence from view. As in Clark Espinal and Lawrence, the way down and the way up are the same movement, reversed. It is a moment of pure becoming, where the past young man and the future deceased father pass each other in both directions.

Kroege's number images show that although we can depict the measure of time's passage, we are unable to depict or imagine the movement of passage itself. Of course, that is the usual function of photographic images: to capture a moment, to freeze time, to preserve the moment in a memory-image. If Kroege's images did only that, they would be perfectly banal.



But his images go further: through reversals of positive and negative, left and right, up and down, forward and backward, his images reveal the illusory nature of the frozen moment, unfreezing it, and setting it free from the linear time-line that runs from beginning to end, birth to death: Kroeger's father is becoming older (as the past moment recedes from the present) and younger (in relation to his future self) at the same time. Kroeger's images give us this vital truth: that every instant is full the movement of the flux of duration. Kroeger's images are anything but static: they move, but never in a straight line—time's arrow from past to future—but in all directions and senses.

VI. Home, again

For Heidegger and Luckács, "home" is a paradise lost which can be regained, either through overcoming alienation or through an "authentic" response to the threat of one's mortality. For the artists presented here, that would be all too simple. "Authenticity" is a retrieval of a personal narrative from the alienating norms of the They, but not a return home to one's true and "original" self. "Home" was an illusion to begin with: not an origin, but already a copy, a fabricated and fictive ideal. At best, there is the ordinary, the everyday, the vernacular—which can be retrieved from the sometimes tranquilizing and always normative narrative of the They and its ideal of "home." When the illusoriness of home is revealed—when home is shown not to be the advertised "safe haven" (Hoffos), when it is cut loose from its present moorings and submerged by the past (Lawrence), when the purity of the ideal is shown to be contaminated with its opposite (Clark Espinal), when "there" and "back again" are shown to be interchangeable—then the ideal is always out of reach, always somewhere else. Home is so remote. Let's go to your place.

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Court House Events

Artists Projects by:

Panya Clark Espinal, Toronto ON

David Hoffos, Lethbridge, AB

Ernie Kroeger, Kamloops, BC

Donald Lawrence, Kamloops, BC

Friday, November 25:

- Court House opens 7:30pm
- A presentation by Celeste Olalquiaga, Paris
author of *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience*
with a response by Walter K. Lew, Writer, Los Angeles
- Reception to follow

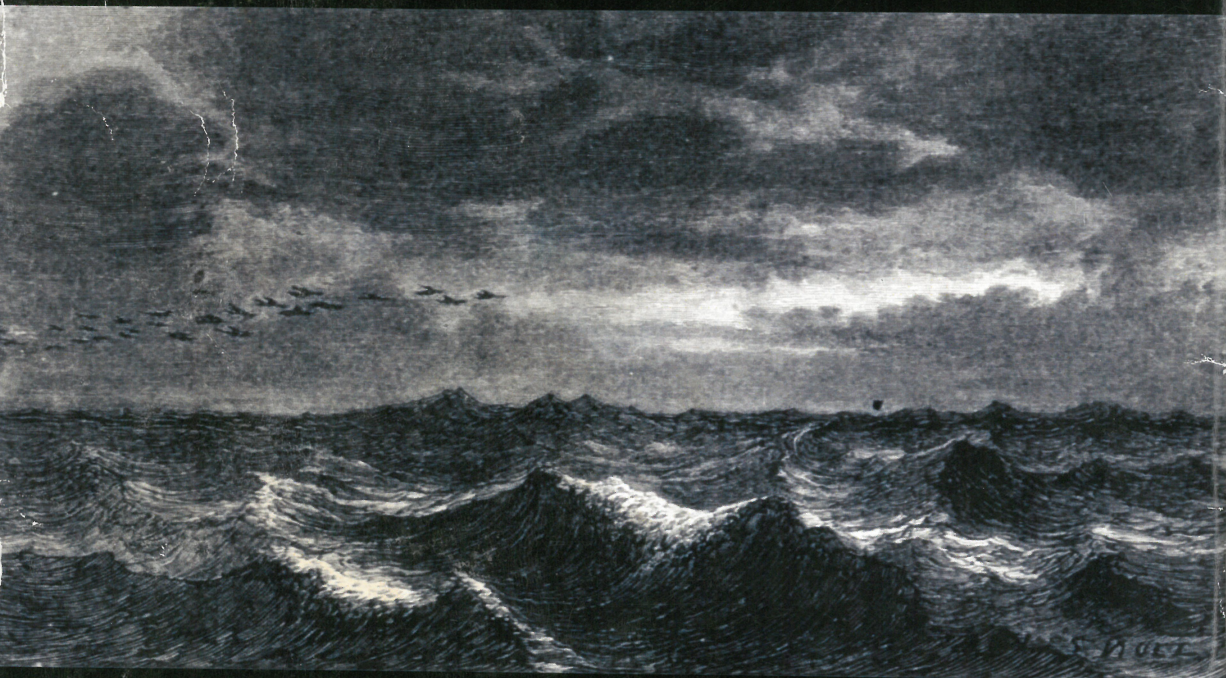
Saturday, November 26:

- Court House open from 11:00am to 5:30pm
- Artists' Discussions from 2:00pm to 4:00pm, with:
Bruce Baugh, Writer and Philosopher, TRU, Kamloops, BC
W.F. Garrett-Petts, Writer and Visual Arts Critic, TRU, Kamloops, BC
Glen Lowry, Writer and Editor, Coquitlam College, Vancouver, BC
Celeste Olalquiaga, Writer and Cultural Theorist, Paris, France

Sunday, November 27:

- Court House open from 11:00am to 5:30pm

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Pamphlet Design by Dana Novak