

Power to the People

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Power to the PEOPLE

For the second consecutive year, Kitchener, Ontario, has hosted a most unique and ambitious contemporary art project. Under the banner of "Contemporary Art Forum" (CAFKA), this themed event consists of multi-media and cross-discipline projects, including video screenings, art exhibitions and installations, panel discussions and artists talks.

The titles for these ambitious projects reference the Kitchener area's history specifically, yet are broad and international in scope. The aim of CAFKA is to take contemporary art out of galleries, studios and artist-run centres and bring them into civic space. Centred in and around Kitchener City Hall, this nine-day event invites and encourages people of all ages and cultural backgrounds, particularly those who do not normally visit galleries, to encounter, react to, and engage with contemporary art and with the artists who create it.

the city government pays a lot of lip-service to its cultural sector. It talks but does nothing to really support or encourage the visual arts community there. From cut-backs in funding to lack of affordable studio/living space to Mel's Moose-takes, Toronto's vibrant visual arts community finds itself repeatedly hitting its head against a seemingly impenetrable wall. This year, in an unparalleled act of contempt and disdain, the Toronto Arts Council did away with the Visual Arts component of the Toronto Arts Awards, an act particularly insulting given that a visual artist was one of the award's founders. With CAFKA as an excellent example, Toronto could undoubtedly learn a lot from Kitchener.

Power to the People references the fact that the former City of Berlin (now Kitchener) set up one of the first publicly owned utilities in the world: the former Ontario Hydro, now known as Hydro One. *Power to the People* coincided with the 100th anniversary of the public ownership of Hydro One, and con-

this history, taking up its democratic connotations, or simply to view public artistic activity as an act of empowerment itself. The work on view considered the nature of democracy, public ownership, free expression and the role of the arts in an increasingly complicated and divided world.

For such an ambitious project with a number of topical cultural issues being broached, CAFKA came off without being didactic, overly serious or impenetrably esoteric. The organizers, artists and participants accomplished this difficult feat with facility and verve. P2P (Matt Gorbet, Rob Gorbet and Susan Gorbet) created an installation significantly situated at the entrance to the City Hall. Consisting of a marquee controlled by a power panel that was accessible to casual passers-by, P2P put "power" back into the hands of the people. By flipping a switch positioned on a panel on the sidewalk in front of City Hall (each switch connected to one light bulb in the marquee) people could create their own mes-

described as a "Scavenging for power in a pseudo scientific manner." Dozens and dozens of identical containers were filled with food and arranged on the floor. Wires then connected the individual components. The resulting installation resembled a mutating, quasi-organic spore. As the food substance decayed and went through a number of degenerative processes, it transformed into electricity. Contrasted against the marble floors, the red and white pattern made by the containers and wires was visually appealing; the smell, however, was decidedly noxious.

Social Power Generator's Shadow, by Jorge Ramirez, was one of the strongest works on view. Installed in City Hall's main rotunda, it consisted of the fabricated shadow (created in light relief by dirt arranged on the floor) of an absent merry-go-round. The artist said that, for him, the merry-go-round's absence represented a transition between a mechanical era of interpersonal relations and an electronic



This annual event is especially significant given the support and enthusiasm the city and its citizens have demonstrated for the decidedly "out of the box" phenomenon. Unlike other urban areas where the visual arts are often ghettoized or ignored, this city has embraced and taken pride in this unique programme. In Toronto, for example,

sisted of over 20 anchor projects executed by more than 35 artists from Canada, Britain, Mexico, France, Germany and the United States.

Andrew Wright, the Artistic Director for the CAFKA, stated that the phrase "Power to the People" encouraged artists either to make works that responded directly to



sages, spell out words or create random patterns. The decision to communicate or obfuscate was left to the individual. Something as simple and routine as turning on a light bulb became a joyous, playful and somewhat subversive activity, liberated from traditional confines and restrictions.

Ben Woodson's work is

era of interface relations characterized by a lack of human and social moments. The effect was sweetly and poignantly poetical. Watching people interact with the work was compelling. There was nothing special to distinguish or protect it. One happened upon it almost by chance. Some people circled around it. Some walked through it, oblivious

BEN WOODSON
Kitchener Radio, 2002
Tomatoes, copper plates, wire, transistor
Photo: Elisabeth Feryn

GORBET, *P2P*, 2002.
Photo: Elisabeth Feryn.

DANIEL OLSON, *Fifteen Seconds*, 2002. Performance with tower and spot light. Photo: Elisabeth Feryn

JOHN MARRIOTT, *Out On a Limb*, 2002. Detail. Mannequin, clothing, flag. Photo: Elisabeth Feryn.



to the pattern they were interfering with. Others, obviously entranced, followed its interconnected pathways, delicately tracing their own path with the one the artist had laid out. This work spoke about change in society, about elements of our culture that are lost and forgotten—gone like dust in the wind. The shadow, not the object itself, is all that remains, and even that is being threatened. The artist calls the viewer's attention to absence and what is gone. Do we notice?

Urban Beasts offered up dark humour. Robert Marbury installed his Demented Teddy-bears and psychotic stuffed toys in the "natural" urban habitat of several locations in downtown Kitchener. They could be found peering down from trees at café-goers sipping on lattes; they emerged from potted plants in civic buildings, stalking the casual office worker and preparing to pounce; another, hanging on a chain link fence, snarls at a shopper. Despite their teeth and claws most people respond to them with humour. Children tried to figure out how to get them off their chains and bring them home. This work reminds us

un-recognized threats in our urban society, whether they be social inequities or environmental degradation. It also suggests that things that might seem threatening—people of different race, sex, etc.—aren't really. A beneficial ambiguity exists in these odd plush creatures. Their small size, with the fact that they are chained up, reduces their potential for harm or destruction to nil. Marbury mixes fact and fiction about these creatures' origins and presents it in historical and "authentic" way. How much of history is like that? he challenges viewers to ask.

David Cheung's installation is also concerned with history. A teepee, almost 20 feet tall and built of bamboo and rice paper, pays tribute to the First Nations and Chinese people who were deprived of their rights to vote under the 1872 "British Columbia Qualifications of Voters Act." Crumpled art works on rice paper placed in a vitrine marked "Souvenirs" commemorate the workers who died during the construction of the western section of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

The crumpled works, like the workers who died or the people who couldn't vote, were disposable and of no value. Yet each individual, like each destroyed artwork, was and is unique. The teepee stands as a delicate sentinel, standing tall, it embodies the existences of those who were all but forgotten.

John Marriott's *On A Limb* is an unlikely looking sentry for *Power to the People*. A silver mannequin, of the size and shape of a young boy, is suspended from a flag pole in City Hall Square. Dressed in baseball hat, shorts and T-shirt, and holding up a yellow flag, Marriott's figure dangles above, seemingly unconcerned about the incongruous position in which he has been mounted. The figure looks very much like a child attending a sporting event (except for the silver skin). The figure might be a peon to the young—those who have power and those who will take risks. However the yellow flag cautions viewers to exercise discretion, and to slow down in pursuits of power.

Helen Quinn based her tabletop

machine, *A New Electrical Machine for the Table*, on eighteenth-century electrical experiments and contraptions. This kinetic installation tracks the movement of a variety of simple mechanisms through light and sound. Alchemy and magicians are referenced as they achieve power through magic and creation. While the steel table has a scientific look, the motion patterns traced in the sand by many delicate pendulums are natural and organic in feel. However, these marks and tracings—the records of what once was—will eventually disappear. As with Rameriz's merry-go-round shadow, many of the things that we believe in, that society "knows," will also disappear over time. We have no power to stop this.

Patrick Bureau's *Perpetual Motion Machine* is visually evocative and mesmerizing, enticing the viewer as the siren's song did Odysseus's sailors. It undulates with sinuous, amorphous elegance. The artistic skill in this piece is evinced in that, while it appears to move every time the viewer changes position, or as the light shifts through the day, the sculpture is of course stationary. What is also interesting is how such a large work can appear to be so delicate and light. Beautifully executed and designed, this large work is amazingly light and organic in feel. Its exceptionally wrought compositional contrasts make it a compelling and effective piece.

With the number and diversity of works and happenings throughout the nine-day event, *Power to the People* could have—under less skilled hands—resulted in a kind of visual cacophony. However, the result was well orchestrated, each element constituting an integral part of the event's effectiveness. Interactivity with a diverse and varied audience is a significant component of this event. Viewers, whether art savvy or not, were unselfconsciousness and willing to be engaged and to participate. The final verdict on CAFKA.02: powerful—and undoubtedly one of the brightest lights in 2002's visual arts calendar.

Power to the People: Contemporary Art Forum Kitchener 02
September 21st to 29th, 2002