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Brian Groombridge

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Artist's studio (two views), work in progress. October 1988.
Photo : Ihor Holubizky

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Brian Groombridge, Cold City Exhibition, November 5 — 30, 1988 — In its hey-day, the Massey-Ferguson building complex covered a major tract of Toronto's downtown land, just west of the central core. It announced, not only the presence of a manufacturing empire, but in its proximity to the financial district of Bay Street and surrounding environs, tangible evidence of the two pillars of industrial capitalism.

As is the pattern of urban development in North American cities, industries have relocated to a suburban ring — spaces which offer a new frontier for capitalism at the end of the 20th century — the emergence of the so-called "industrial park". It provides a physical and psychological break with the past and the history of the labour movement and struggle and the cycle of boom and depression. If the essential conditions of wage labour and economics remain unchanged, its history can be re-aligned. The future lies in an axis between the "bedroom" suburb and this new "garden of Eden".

What is left is the reminder of another history and work. As these industrial dinosaurs are gradually obliterated, the spaces are filled by a new middle-class, fuelled by the lure of urban living, real estate values and a service-information oriented work system.

In this historical and economic inevitable, there can be a brief respite. Before gentrification consumes these areas, they often become a refuge for artists. Ironically, the presence of an aesthetic and social activity accelerates its own demise. The scenario is all too familiar in places such as London's Wapping Wall, New York's Soho, Montreal's Le Vieux Port and Berlin's Kreuzberg. The activity which takes place there becomes relegated to memory much in the way that the buildings themselves are razed or renovated.

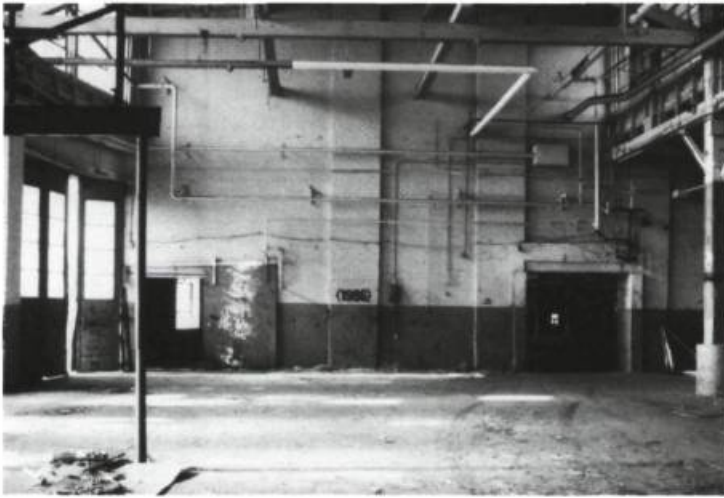
In the Old City

The Massey-Ferguson buildings have, in their abandoned state, been the focus of attention for Toronto artists — Peter MacCallum's photographic discourse, shown at Mercer Union in the spring of 1988 — a location in Margaret Dragu's 1987 film, "I Want to Be Alone" — and the site of a video by Toronto independent band, Vital Sines. In the winter of 1987-1988, Toronto artist Brian Groombridge worked at various sites in the buildings. Rather than succumbing to the poignant and ironic associations of the buildings, Groombridge through a series of carefully positioned symbolic moments, suggested a parallel construction of history, myth and phenomenon.

Groombridge's work, *Comets Tell of Great Distances Travelled* was not intended as an event or exhibition. There was no invitation, no vernissage, and for the most part, no audience. Because of the safety requirements, only a few people were allowed access to the sites, escorted by the artist. It was not, as Groombridge admitted, an ideal situation to consider his work, but the restrictions resulted in a unique and thought-provoking experience.

The work consisted of numbers cut from steel and bracketed. Installed as "historical" dates, (1986), (1910), (1835), (1758), and (1682) they referred to (and I have to give away the "punchline") the last five appearances of Halley's Comet. While this "fact" was revealed to me after I had seen the work, I was conscious during the "tour" that somehow, if the dates I was "reading" did not refer to a specific event related to the building's history (especially after [1910]), that there was another historical convergence.

The dates were positioned in distinct and varied spaces which, through a process of sympathetic



Brian Groombridge, *Comets Tell of Great Distances Travelled*, installation at Massey-Ferguson, Toronto. December 1987.
Photo : Peter MacCallum

association, took on the characteristic of their "time". (1986) was set at the end of a long assembly space, the most recent part of the building. (1910) was placed at the end of a "late-Victorian" columned space — narrow and high— with the kind of residue that one associates with the early industrial age and reminiscent of the abandoned buildings at Ellis Island. (1835) was "discovered" in a more open and lighter space, almost "Georgian" in feeling. (1758) was also in an open space, but the columns, cast in concrete, took on the appearance of Egyptian Revival style. The floor here was smooth and covered with a layer of blue/black soot which left impressions of our footprints as we entered and left. Finally, (1682) was found in an intimate corner, but unlike most of the other spaces, appeared to show little evidence of deterioration, almost as if we had entered a room which had been sealed for centuries. This was as far away as we could get from any historical memory. After all, can anyone "remember" a specific historical event from 1682 ?

By the time this date, (1682), was reached the work seemed purified. History seemed abstract and removed. Looking out through a window did not provide a jolt into the present. The skyline became another vista — a manifestation of some place and some time.

The history of Halley's Comet is not the only issue in this work. Its appearance, when coded by dates, served neither to explicate the phenomenon or have any significance to historical events as we understand them. Assurance comes in folding the unknown and intangible into what we believe to be true about ourselves.

A few weeks after the "tour", the buildings and the work were gone.

In the Cold City

As I write, Groombridge is preparing for a solo exhibition at Cold City Gallery in Toronto. The work is different from *Comets tell...* in that Groombridge has the advantage of a familiar space in which to show and an audience to view and consider the work. But there is a direct and distinct common concern between the two works.

The three elements in the exhibition consist of a three foot square stainless steel plate etched with a diagram illustrating the principle of leverage — an abbreviated, almost child-like glider composed of copper plate, steel plate and steel tubing — and an "X" configuration made from 5" diameter patined copper discs. They have separate and individual meanings as objects and symbols, but positioned together, can and will be read as a disjunctive mediation on history and myths.

The diagram on the stainless steel plate is taken directly from a textbook illustration. It is simple to the point of being folksy, but has an external reference to a "major" event/discovery — Archimedes' claim that given the ideal position and tools, the world (as he knew it) could be moved by a single person.

The glider is assembled rather than constructed, but even in its reductivist form, it is decidedly referential... almost real. We can wonder if it will fly even though logic and reason tells us otherwise. It holds the contemporary equivalence of Archimedes' principle, that man can defy the laws of nature as well as move nature at will.

The third element, an "x" mounted on the wall, in its most basic meaning, locates a point. (Even this simplified sign is deceptive, because it is itself composed of a series of points.) As an object it could be a dis-embodied propeller for the glider, or perhaps the location of the fulcrum point in the steel plate diagram.

Or perhaps like the dates in *Comets tell...* there is a phenomenological reference — the X Factor. Ironically, the "unseen" sign in *Comets Tell...* is equally reductivist, the depiction of Halley's Comet in the 11th century Bayeux Tapestry.

Groombridge has used the power of symbolic association in earlier work, historic references in *Balance and Power*, 1983, and generic symbols in *Myths Are Dreams Many Have Told* from 1986. In the Cold City work, Groombridge provides us with the symbols for us to consider what we know about the world of objects and a system by which we hold beliefs and ideas.