

ETC



Fragmented Identity

Douglas Buis, Galerie B 312, Montréal. September 5-26,1992

Mike Molter

Number 21, February–May 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/36044ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

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Cite this review

Molter, M. (1993). Review of [*Fragmented Identity* / Douglas Buis, Galerie B 312, Montréal. September 5-26,1992]. *ETC*, (21), 48–49.

ACTUALITÉS / EXPOSITIONS

MONTREAL FRAGMENTED IDENTITY

Douglas Buis, Galerie B-312, Montréal. September 5-26, 1992



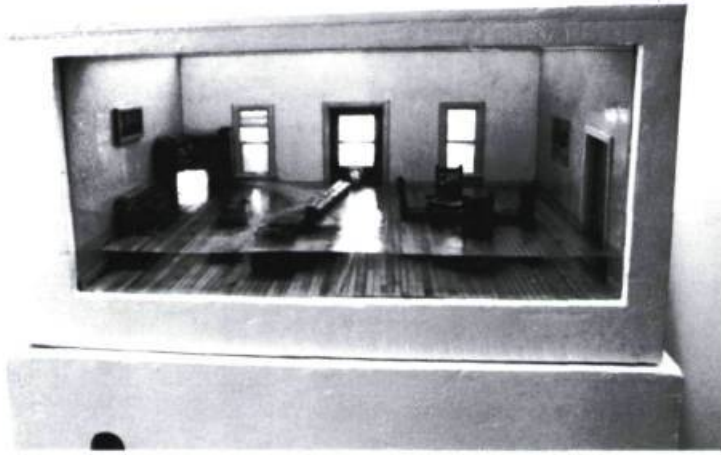
Douglas Buis, *Heart of the Matter (Tool for Remapping)*, 1992.

Douglas Buis, kinetic artist from London, Ontario, based in Montreal, builds work that questions the Canadian identity. A boatpiece titled *Heart of the Matter* resembles a bit of a bird, a bit of fish, and evokes a little of the *fleur de lys* (Québécois relate it to the story of the Chasse Galerie); a multi-cultural, mixed-media technology that definitely doesn't swim or fly. Built from parts discarded in streets, wood from scrap, except the 2 x 4s, the arms for the wings made of shop awnings, it was originally to be used in the next phase of an evolving work for a group exhibition *Whapmagoostui*, titled *Walking Lightly*, and suspended in the air with inverted trees reaching ground, sand and water. "Whether my resourcefulness comes from being the son of a Dutch farmer, I don't know, but I've also learned it from tree planting and from the Cree in *Whapmagoostui*, Great Whale."

Buis' *Heart of the Matter* (a plan for re-mapping), is about the different polarities of Canadian culture, split in so many ways they are impossible to reconcile. A second piece, titled *Home*, a sort of generic living space not unlike those found in the north, is a 1/12 replica model installation that floods and empties at the push of a button. On a television screen and behind actual windows are video

images of the landscape and people of Grande Baleine. "Seeing the home I built filling up with water made me focus on the definition of home. The house we inhabit and the collection of our possessions is a large part of our identity. The Cree attachment is to the land. When we talk of improving our home, we take things out of the environment. The native view is to maintain it. This is a profound difference in the culture that we share."

Buis started the *Whapmagoostui* project with artist Kevin Kelly while tree planting in the summer. When they were awarded a Canada Council Explorations Grant for artist fees they invited ten artists representative of the provinces and peoples across Canada to participate. They applied to the Grand Council of the Cree for transportation. "I went up there with instructions to organize meetings with the Elders. Getting there, you begin to read it differently; it's Cree Time. They do things more naturally. When it's the correct time they gave a goose break. They invited me to a walking out ceremony of all the children walking for the first time that year. Things do not connect linearly. The Cree are not against progress, and don't operate an anti-Dam campaign without a fax machine. They are adaptable. They can go out for eight months on a hunt and come back to television after living in a tepee. They are



Douglas Buis, *Home*, 1992. Bois, techniques mixtes, vidéo, diapositives, projecteur, eau ; 144,7 x 73,6 x 101,6 cm.

comfortable with that; they just don't want to see the destruction of their environment. We spent a lot of time in canoes up there. *Heart of the Matter* is from the design of those canoes, but reflecting the situation. The river is going to be diverted, their home is going to be flooded, but not the town. The river is their highway, food, and the Great Whale estuary is fresh water for the Beluga to swim in and cleanse themselves of parasites. For all of them it will simply be dried up. I finally met an elder when the weather socked in and he had the most beautiful painted canoe he had built when in his teens; he was now in his seventies. Before going out to bring in the net he sang in his language. He lives in and with his environment."

Home was originally planned by Buis as a theatre piece. The actors would be sitting around the breakfast table while the room fills up with water, never talking about it. When he realized that it would cost about a \$100 000 to produce full-size, the maquette became the work. The video and slide images are the link between the home as the house, and the home as the environment, connecting the piece to the theme itself.

"The piece I plan for the group exhibition at the Maison de la Culture du Plateau Mont-Royal, January 17 to February 20, 1993, titled *Walking Lightly*, projects things like walking pathways about a foot and a half wide and 1 500 years old. There are archaeological sights there 2 000 years old. Nothing is destroyed or ruined; markings of passage without destruction. Their environment is very fragile, just sand. Doing a piece about hydro-related projects is to point out what is at stake and what is up there that people here are not aware of; not the characteristics of a museum piece or a zoo display. We are getting to the point where we are in deep shit. We don't know what we are doing, trying to buy environmentally friendly products, while these people practice real resource management.

"My father, rather than building a farm on a master plan, fiddled together a farm experimenting with things. I learned to build with spit and chicken wire. We didn't have a television, so I learned to build things out of wood. I am actually building a piece in my studio for the tour when it goes to Amsterdam in July and August titled *Dutch*. I hate throwing things out. I'm about to sweep the floor after cutting wood for a piece and I save the scraps to integrate them into *Dutch*."

Buis describes an experience while tree planting when he started picking huckleberries. "I was mesmerized by the green berries against the background. Life is an aesthetic process. Sex is pleasing so as to continue the life process. The closer you get to basic life the more aesthetic it gets. The life for the people in Great Whale is aesthetic. One of the planters couldn't believe I was losing time picking berries. Tree planting, when you have been doing it as long as I have, can be a matter of \$ 500 a day, and can help provide expenses for art production. In our culture, everything we does mediated through money. Everything we do outside the job filters through that. What we do for a living and what we do for our life usually has little connection."

Buis describes the Cree as a cooperative vs. competitive society. The talisman tells them what they may hunt unless it is a life and death matter. He believes it would be useful for us to acknowledge some of their concepts, sharing technology toward efficiency in the economy, providing more useful, long-lasting employment than hydro development.

"The Great Whale Dam should not be built. I went up there not knowing what to expect. I got the very clear impression that they are neither holding out for more money, nor all that interested, They know that building that dam would destroy their way of life. If the dam is built the land is at stake and the knowledge for a new generation to be learned and handed down will be lost. If a community uses land over a period of years, they gain title to it. There is no Québécois presence there presently and the dam only establishes a presence of the Québec government in Great Whale. It is not economically viable.

Buis sums up the experience of Great Whale in his recent work that will tour in the group exhibition *Whapmagoostui*, in Cree and *Kuujjuarapik* in Inuit, with a look back at Great Whale: "Maybe it was inevitable that we come this way, because we had so many resources. Going up there made me see what is valuable in their home – the blueberry pick, the eating of the goose, the ritual of the hunt and the cooking of the feast, the process of the entire life of the hunt, and the chance to participate in a society on a communal basis."

MIKE MOLTER