

Clearcut

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clearcut

Debbie O'Rourke

In a working-class mall in Toronto, among the stores hawking jeans, ice-cream and mass-produced jewelry, one space was a startling contrast to all of the others. In this palace of drywall, under fluorescent glare in an unoccupied store-front, stood the ruin of an Art Deco office, fabricated from massive shards of rich mahogany.

Walking through this skeletal reconstruction of the former Woolworth president's office, skirting the rubble that commemorated its destruction, viewers encountered a series of slide images documenting extinct architectural treasures. They marveled over the models John Martins-Manteiga had crafted of two fallen colossi: the Victory Soya Mills and the John Inglis Plate Shop. Each giant had been shrunk to the size of a single recumbent human. They lay on coffin-like, processional platforms built from the salvaged mahogany. The models were surrounded by crimson poppies like honoured war dead.

This exhibition was created by installation artist Gene Threndyle and film-maker John Martins-Manteiga. They are both dedicated building-watchers who have fought for and documented the architectural heritage of Toronto. To accompany the exhibition they published a book, also called *Clearcut*. More than a catalogue, it is at once a poetic chronicle and an erudite example of good old-fashioned political pamphleteering.

These are artists whose creative lives are bound up with and reflective of their environments. An earlier installation by Threndyle co-documented the mating of squirrels and the roaring of a drunk in his

Gene Threndyle and John Martins-Manteiga, *Clearcut*. Installation view, Woolworth Building, Bay Street windows. Photo: Gene Threndyle.





Parkdale neighbourhood. Martins-Manteiga's architectural films are psycho-histories with evocative titles like *The Hazards of Falling Glass*. Of the series of four, three are still in process: "Buildings falling down has really interrupted the flow of my work". The models in the exhibition were constructed for one of these films, called *Dies Irae* (Latin for "the wrath of God").

Ardent students of design and architecture and well-versed in history and nature, Threndyle and Martins-Manteiga regard the old Inglis plant as the architectural equivalent of a giant redwood. But they are concerned about the preservation of modest buildings as well as historical structures and design gems. Viable structures are replaced by new ones at high financial and ecological cost. In contemporary times the pace of the destruction has been so frantic that even precious materials such as marble and mahogany are shattered and loaded into dumpsters.

A spare and solid Art Deco structure, the downtown Toronto Woolworth Building was not ostentatious in its design. Yet even on exhibition in its ruined state, the quality of its materials and craftsmanship exude a sense of authority and comfort. Wood is a remarkable material. Those who love it and work with it find it difficult to speak of without sliding into mysticism. Even splintered, its presence can be more comforting than a score of Walmart greeters. It was no accident that this particular archeological site had been created a few steps away from the discount behemoth. It seemed to haunt its successor like a gentler version of Marley's ghost.

"The Woolworth Building was built during an expanding economy after the

Great Depression and the Second World War. It caused the demolition of an older part of the city, and in its own way celebrated that decade of hope and relief when modern Western society was in full bloom. If five and dime stores could erect such fine buildings then the modern era would surely see an end to war and poverty. The parking lot that will replace it and reduce it to so much land-fill celebrates nothing but represents as much."¹

This building had been a favorite haunt of generations of Toronto children, and for the two artists its date with the dumpster was a personal as well as an architectural emergency. Gaining access to the site, Threndyle and Martins-Manteiga spent several winter evenings prying precious materials away from the doomed walls even as floors were being demolished nearby.

"The paneling on these walls was most likely a growing tree until a few years before this building went up in 1949. That mahogany tree, growing perhaps in Central America or Indonesia, would have been centuries old in a primeval tropical rain forest. If you could find that spot on the earth right now, chances are slim that you would find a regenerating forest. The marble on the first floor (of the demolished building), the carved limestone on the top floor, were all quarried from the earth with the pretext of building a city... If that isn't bad enough, more of the earth must be taken up to bury the rubble."²

When the artists showed the mahogany to a salvage operator, he told them: "You should put this stuff up somewhere and show people the kind of waste that goes on. This is not extraordinary. Every day in Toronto, waste like this happens." They found a suitable site in Dufferin Mall,

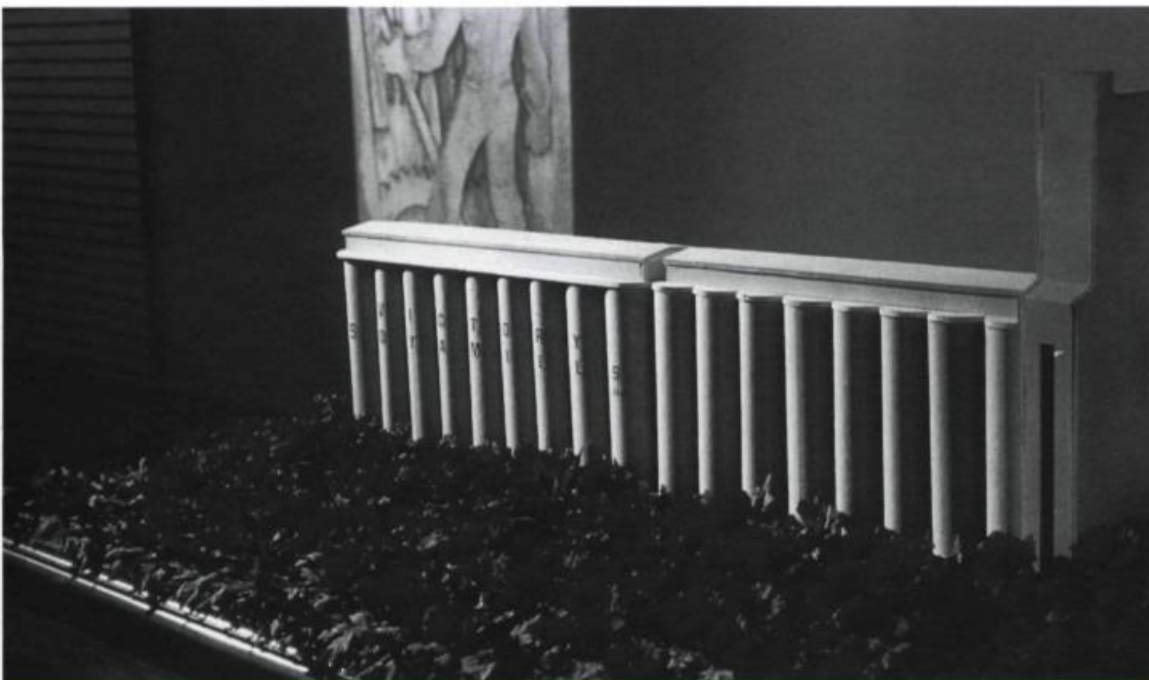
whose far-sighted management has dealt with its vandalism problems by housing youth outreach and educational programs. It also frequently rents out empty storefronts to artists.

The mall turned out to be an ideal venue not only because of the proximity of the Walmart store, but because it is a haunt for many retired people who had lived in Toronto's Parkdale, a working-class neighbourhood where Threndyle and Martins-Manteiga both reside. This is a community with close ties to some of the eulogized buildings. Many passersby gave the storefront with its strange contents a wide berth. But there was a constant trickle of interested people who engaged the artists in conversation.

Those who mustered the courage to venture into the unknown territory of the installation artists tended to be those who had lived or worked near the buildings that were commemorated. The artists' presence was important, standing in a rubble pile that represented the remains of a building or sitting in dim light sharing memories of structures as their slide images flickered on the drywall. While I was present a former worker at Massey-Ferguson, near the Inglis plant and sharing its fate, reminisced with Gene Threndyle:

"In 'forty-nine, nearly everyone in the West End of Toronto worked at either Inglis or Massey. Now, a lot of people don't even work... You see, everybody lived in the district and they'd all walk to work. It used to be a nice walk to Massey and back. But it's all gone now. I still live there but the last few years before I retired, I had to drive all the way out to Malton. It was hell... But that's what happened to Toronto: all your industry's gone and all your building is plazas and shop-

John Inglis Plant, model by John Martins-Manteiga.
Photo: Gene Threndyle.



Victory Soya Mill Silo, model by John Martins-Manteiga; Louis Camparelli bas-relief. Photo: Gene Threndyle.

Gene Threndyle and John Martins-Manteiga, *Clearcut*. Installation view, Woolworth Building, secretary's door, south wall. Photo: Gene Threndyle.

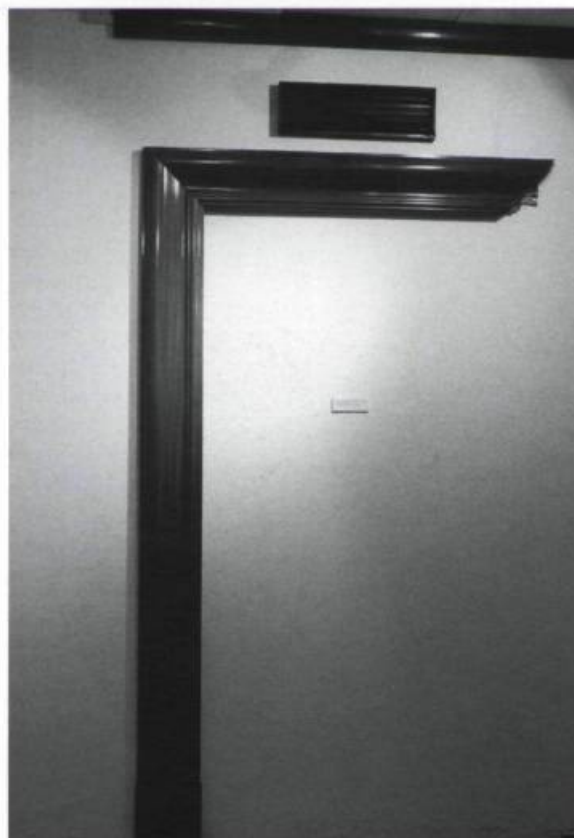
Gene Threndyle and John Martins-Manteiga, *Clearcut*. Woolworth Building, assorted mahogany trim, south wall. Photo: Gene Threndyle.

ping places and there's no I don't understand it."

When buildings go, so does the habitat they have created. When structures that could have continued to house employment and people are reduced to debris, so is their capacity to shelter and nurture human activity. The result of the physical destruction of Inglis, whose seven hundred workers were laid off after the company was purchased by Whirlpool, was the eradication of economic potential.

With the advent of Free Trade, the jobs at Inglis moved first to Michigan and then to Mexico. Thus a way of life was destroyed that was not only secure and pleasant for the workers, but ecologically sound. Too often this disruption of the human ecology is deliberate. Those who advocate a model of civic design in which walking or cycling to work can be the norm are accused of wild-eyed impracticality at best, branded Eco-Nazis at worst. But in Parkdale, this life-style was in place only a generation ago. Are jobs, clean air and a liveable planet impractical ideas? On these issues, who are the radicals?

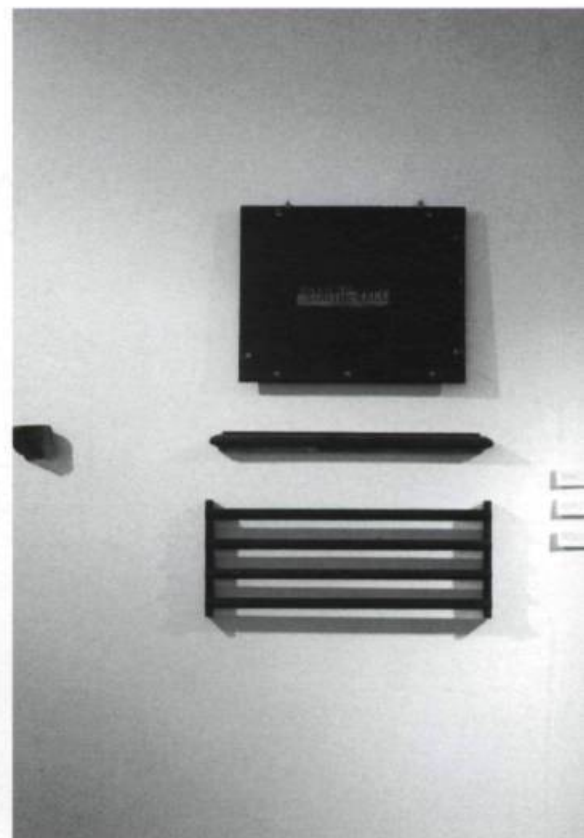
For better or worse, most humans no longer live close to nature but in habitats that have been created for us. The beauty and serviceability of these structures mold the lives and thoughts of the people who live them and, as surely as any cliff or waterfall, they become landmarks and signifiers.



"(Buildings are) built resources and demolishing them is an extravagant waste that happens in the name of corporate profit. More and more, these corporations have no stake in the cities where they do business. They harvest money from the inhabitants of a city, the way lumber companies harvest trees. These large tracts of empty lots in our city are like the areas of clear-cut you see up north, in British Columbia or in the tropical rainforest where this mahogany woodwork came from."³

Many argue that the city itself is a living organism, and it is surely the human equivalent of the beehive or the termite mound. Defending nature is not only a matter of preserving that which is green or has fur or feathers. It requires that we defend ourselves, in all of our delicate diversity. Creativity is our instinct and our birthright. While each generation makes its own contribution, the vast, extended memory humanity has built must be added to and not destroyed. On these questions, the artists and activists often sound like true conservatives: "Every generation must be allowed to express themselves in building, but that expression does not give one licence to destroy the work of the previous generation."⁴

Threndyle and Martins-Manteiga represent a generalist approach to art-making. The demands of the information age has created scientists, from Isaac Asimov to



David Suzuki, who are also communicators and often activists. In the art world, an expressed commitment to the social and natural environment, once an anomaly, is beginning to emerge as a movement that seriously challenges the status quo. It is becoming more difficult for serious curators to refuse to look at socially-engaged art. It is demanding its place in the canon alongside the extraordinary human-created objects and various theoretical ephemera.

The interests of the aesthete, the eco-

gist and the factory worker are not opposed, but communicating this vital fact requires that those who see through the facades find ways to engage their communities. An artist who wants to have an impact on his or her society is in a difficult position, for activist work is still difficult to fund or find venues for, and most citizens never set foot in an

was an excellent one, drawing in an audience that is ordinarily intimidated by galleries and giving many a very meaningful, even unforgettable experience. This is good for art.

A street-smart resident of working-class Parkdale and intellectually a combination of naturalist, artist, social critic

are living habitats, cultural and historical tools and haunted vaults of memory. His film *Dies Irae* is a requiem not only for the unique structures, but for the pride and strength they represented for the nation that built them. The recently demolished Victory Soya Mills was built to celebrate the Allies' victory over the Nazis, which many in that generation saw as a conquest of evil itself. "Canada became aware of itself during this period," says Martins-Manteiga. "Memories are tied to objects. When we lose them we lose our sense of ourselves."

Threndyle agrees. "The Inglis plant, built in 1939 was inspired by the Bauhaus. It was built seven years after the Bauhaus was closed by the Nazis — built specifically to make arms to fight the Nazis. And it was run by women. That alone makes it historically significant."

Our surroundings contribute to our sense of identity and belonging, and affirm or destroy a connection to previous generations. This is the magic that a created object, large or small, can carry. This is why First Nations petition museums for the return of items that to the curious, Sunday afternoon viewer are mere artifacts. To the communities from which they were taken, they are physical links to the ancestors who have also held them in their hands: holders of history, stimulators of personal and community memory.

Perhaps the powers that be have no desire to nurture such recollections. Never again will anyone walk through the echoing vault of the Inglis factory: no Canadian labourer will make a machine to be used by Canadians, under a roof where a great-aunt or a grandmother may have worked. And now, no one will read the word VICTORY written a hundred feet high on a Canadian building, making that important connection between food production, transportation and the strength of a nation. ■

Clearcut

An installation by Gene Threndyle and John Martins-Manteiga

Dufferin Mall, Toronto

March 22 to April 5, 1997

NOTES:

1. Gene Threndyle and John Martins-Manteiga, *Clearcut* (1997), page 15.
 2. *Clearcut* (1997), page 10.
 3. *Clearcut* (1997), page 10.
 4. *Clearcut* (1997), page 43.
- (Copies of *Clearcut* can be obtained by writing to Gene Threndyle, # 103- 900 Queen Street West, Toronto (Ontario), M6J 1G6. Books are \$10. plus \$2. postage and shipping).

Gene Threndyle,
Woolworth Building,
Photocopy collage.
Photo: Gene
Threndyle.



art gallery. In art academia, engaging the public has been considered to be a priority only for those who wish to enter commercial design fields. Thus, the considerable powers of artists have been harnessed to facilitate commercial interests while those who desire to serve society must find their own way. The Dufferin Mall confrontation

and story-teller, Gene Threndyle has a facility for connecting issues that have been falsely placed in opposition. He is a professional gardener who is as likely to be found fighting for a patch of reclaimed meadow as for an Art Deco treasure.

For John Martins-Manteiga, buildings