

## Collective Unconscious *Project 2*

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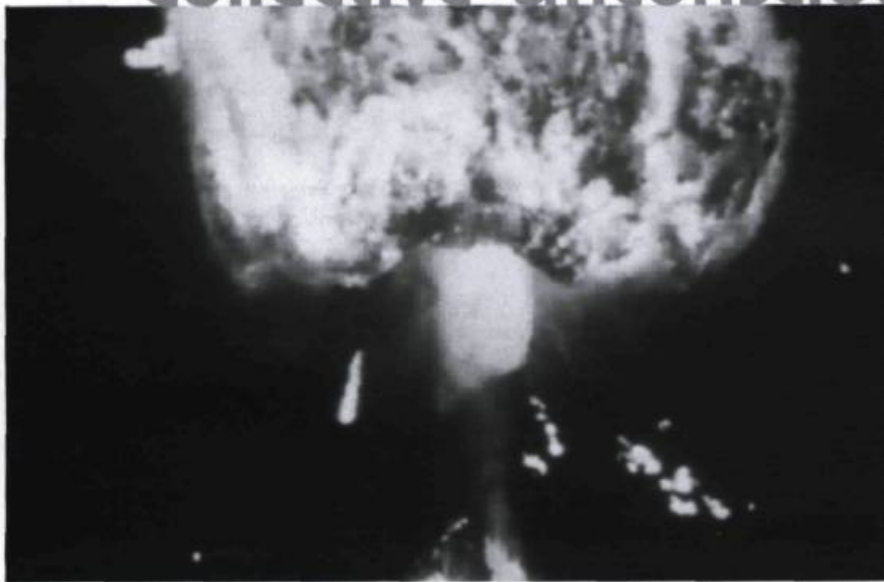
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## Collective Unconscious, Project 2

VIRGINIA MACDONNELL EICHHORN



Vessna Perunovich, *Fireplace*, 2000. Video still — part of a sculptural installation. 2.7 x 2.4 x 4.8 m. Photo courtesy of the artist.

*The process of assimilating the unconscious leads to some very remarkable phenomena.*

C.G. JUNG<sup>1</sup>

The Collective Unconscious is a Toronto-based group of four artists: Michelle Bellemare, Vessna Perunovich, Celeste Scopelites, Natalie Waldburger. The two exhibits that they have mounted were untitled (save for the designations *Project 1* and *Project 2*), although each show had an unmistakable thematic content.

They held their first show at the Wagner Rosenbaum Gallery. The occupied space was very “homey.” It consisted of four smallish rooms on the second floor of a building that was slightly run-down. The artists reacted to this space, creating sculptural installations that explored the associations and “unconscious” imagery of domestic space. Within it, commonplace objects became metaphors for the body and its experiences in a mundane environment — most of which were somewhat disturbing or poignant, or a combination of the two. The viewer entered a topsyturvy world where the items on view — ironing boards, stairs, eggs — were lifted from their safe, routine context and given a new and enlarged meaning. Thus, a staircase mounted on a rocking metal base whispers to the viewer that any progress we feel

we have made is illusionary and potentially dangerous. Suspended eggs, infinitely fragile, evoked the sense of how isolated one can be in life. And an ironing board, pinning down a bizarre red casing for male genitalia, articulates the frustrations, limitations and even the absurdity of traditional gender roles.

In their second exhibit, Collective Unconscious moved out of the domestic realm. The work that was on view at the York Quay Gallery (Harbourfront Centre) from September 15 to October 29, 2000, retained the artists’ signature personal approaches, but addressed broader issues as well. Each artist has created a highly personalized work, based on something within her own experience (either actual or imagined). These experiences have been used to create work which then interacts thematically with the other artists within the collective and also addresses larger issues that are pertinent to individual viewers and to society as a whole.

Michelle Bellemare’s *Double Net* is a kinetic structure of variable dimensions. It consists of two butterfly hoops and handles that share an interconnected net made of waxed thread. The net moves purposelessly, fluttering and flapping as if it were itself the animal which it had set out to trap. The utter futility of this endeavour is further emphasized by the fact that the net between the two hoops has no sealed end in which to contain its prey. Should one be unfortunate enough to be “caught” in one

hoop, one can continue through the tunnel and ultimately succeed in being released through the other end. The only way there could be success in “capturing” something would be if the two ends cooperated and worked together. This is impossible however. They move without synchronicity. They move without purpose. Each end appears to move independently and without regard to the movements of the other. In their blindness to each other they ultimately frustrate themselves and there is no chance of success.

*Double Net* reminds the viewer that one must achieve some sort of integration of intent, purpose and knowledge to attain one’s goals. This can refer to an integration between the cognitive and the unconscious kinds of knowledge. It can refer to how we assemble all of the different aspects of our personal lives: how can I attain happiness? How can I be successful? What must I do so that my goals are not at cross-purposes with each other? On a larger scale, Bellemare’s work is a not-so-subtle reminder that the society and world in which we live in must also be regarded in a holistic manner. If one is concerned only with one’s self, and fails to recognize the ties that bind us together (rich, poor, the environment, health, *et cetera*) then we are ultimately hurting ourselves.

Vessna Perunovich’s work arouses in the viewer mixed feelings of horror, compassion and sadness. A native of Yugoslavia, Perunovich — along with her husband and daughter — left Belgrade for Canada 12 years ago. Much of her work can be viewed as coming out of that experience, but the personal element and her technique give it a strength and integrity and creative “spark” that lifts these installations easily out of the realm of the didactic and into that of the “unconscious creative.”

*A Cradle for the Nation* consists of a child’s crib, incredibly delicate but also extremely threatening. It appears to be made of barbed wire and contained within it are a number of white balloons. In viewing this work one can’t help but be worried — even if there is no child in the bed — that the bal-

loons are going to pop. It sounds like a small thing, a silly thing, but it effectively created a great sense of tension and anxiety in those who viewed it. And while some visitors might have wanted to “rescue” the balloons, the fear of causing the balloons to break or of being harmed by the “barbed wire” outweighed the desire to help. Yet, upon closer examination, one found that the “barbed wire” was nothing more than elastic cord. This cord could be stretched, pulled and ultimately even danced upon. It could not be threatening or harmful in any way. We the viewer let what it resembled, what its appearance evoked for us, determine our experience and reaction.

Likewise Perunovich’s *Fireplace* installation played on those same unconscious fears of ours. In this work a television screen played a repeated image of a bomb exploding. Keeping the viewer distanced from it was a wall of “barbed wire.” While the image played on the screen one could hear a child’s disembodied voice singing quietly the nursery rhyme “Ring Around the Rosy.” This nursery rhyme, as with many others, isn’t really innocent or innocuous. Written about the plague, it is a “celebration” of catching death (“Ashes, ashes, we all fall down”) and of how we try to protect ourselves against it, mostly ineffectually, with our “pockets full of posy.” *Fireplace* calls to mind the number of things that are done to protest against war and destruction — petitions, marches, and so forth — yet the artist powerfully questions the assumption that any of these things have really made a difference at all. Are we, in western society, really children playing at a game and fooling ourselves that being fashionably politically correct is enough to stop the dropping of bombs and the destruction of life? Perunovich’s answer is clearly No. Again, as with the cradle, the only thing that is hampering our doing so is our own perceived fear of what we think is there, but isn’t really. We could cross through the “wire” wall and turn off the bomb imagery. But nobody did.

Despite the difficult subject matter, something about Perunovich’s work draws the viewer in and compels us to

approach, regardless of its disturbing nature. Somehow the viewer recognizes what is being portrayed and is drawn to it. Likewise, her choice of materials is especially significant. The "barbed wire" that we feel threatened by and that inhibits us from doing something is in fact an elastic cord that cannot hurt or harm us in any way. Our fears have become the root of our inaction, our justification for what we do not do. Perunovich reminds us that we are held back from doing what we should, from doing what we could, not by what is really there, but by what we think we see. And what we think we see is often not real, but illusory.

Celeste Scopelites uses domestic objects, such as butter knives, wineglasses and balls of twine in her installation, which is somewhat quieter, less angry and anguished than either Bellemare's or Perunovich's. Her wall work, *Butter Knives*, uses commonplace, nonthreatening objects arranged in a pattern. The blades of the knives are intercrossed and woven together, thereby creating a pleasing, decorative pattern reminiscent of plaids or tartans. These knife-arrangements are then mounted on the wall to form another kind of pattern. It seems like a fairly innocuous installation, but to read it as such is to neglect the "spark" of the symbol, which the artist has painstakingly and subtly created.

To begin with Scopelites's knives, like Bellemare's net, have no purpose. They have been

transformed from something utilitarian into something decorative. Their purpose has been thwarted and they are frozen in place, unusable by anyone; nonetheless, they remain unmistakably knives. As such, Scopelites's installation symbolizes how one can become locked into a pattern, an order or a way of doing something that ultimately frustrates one's potential. Likewise, the wine glass, entwined with string and covered with a bell-jar, is rendered unusable and obsolete. While one could argue that these ordinary items of knife, glass and string have been transformed and given a new life, the overall feeling derived from this installation is cautionary. The viewer is being warned and reminded about narrow and rigid states of mind. The beauty of the work serves further to hint at those things that can seduce us without offering us anything of substance in return.

Natalie M. Waldburger's installation comprised a myriad related elements, some of which subtly changed throughout the duration of the exhibition. Waldburger's is the most obviously personal of the works presented by the four artists in the collective. She has used elements such as pictures from childhood and entries from her diary. These particular and individual elements convey universal sentiments, however. The experience of many becomes reflected in the experience of one.

Perhaps the overall sentiment expressed in Waldburger's instal-

lation is regret, sorrow, or loss. *In a small voice* is made up of dozens of white balloons, in various stages of deflation and fullness. Onto each balloon is printed a small message in lowercase lettering, things like "that's not what I meant" and "I'm sorry." The artist stated that they were all things that she had either said too much or hadn't said enough. Over time, as the balloons deflate, the sayings become harder to read, eventually becoming unintelligible. This work reminds us of the limitations of verbal language. In looking at it I was reminded of the conversation between Alice and guests at the Mad Tea-Party in *Wonderland*, where she is variously told that to mean what you say and say what you mean are as different as saying that you like what you eat and you eat what you like. How often is what we say without meaning? How many of our words or sentiments become little puffs of air that gradually deteriorate into nothingness? How many opportunities have we missed to say or do something truly meaningful? *In a small voice* asks us, but cannot give us an answer.

*My Weight in Regret* can be seen as the visual companion piece to *In a small voice*. Here, Waldburger took images from her childhood photographs and painted them on a wall in water-colour. During the run of the exhibition, 100 pounds of water (the artist's weight) gradually washed away the images that she had painted. This work asks the

viewer what makes an experience real. Is it our memory of it or is it the documentation of an event that makes something "true"? As time progresses many people find that they have forgotten friends, places or experiences. As such one often questions what makes something real? Did it happen or did I imagine it? And what gives primary importance to the "real" as opposed to the "imagined." Importantly the artist feels that our loss of experience and of memory is something that is cause for sorrow and remorse. Her work asks if we can reclaim that knowledge, those experiences which we have lost, or if we are destined to forget them forever? The water that seeps and drips down the walls, gradually eradicating the images painted there, is a visceral reference to tears, to blood and to our physical experience taking over that which exists in the realm of the cerebral.

The works created by the artists involved with Collective Unconscious' *Project* argue that experience and knowledge cannot be solely based on the cognitive and the rational. One must acknowledge that spark of the unconscious, and recognize that it is integral to full understanding. ■

#### NOTE

1. Jung, Carl, "The Basic Writings of C.J. Jung," *Phenomena resulting from the Assimilation of the Unconscious* (Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1990) p. 123.

## LORRAINE FONTAINE *La chambre d'Écho(s)* *ou le mythe de Narcisse réinventé*

MONIQUE LANGLOIS

L'installation de Lorraine Fontaine, *Ô Narcisse, ma sœur...*, a été présentée du 5 octobre 2000 au 21 janvier 2001, à la salle 1 du Musée du Québec<sup>1</sup>, un lieu reconnu pour favoriser les expériences en art actuel. C'est ce qu'a fait l'artiste en réinventant le mythe de Narcisse. Or, chacun sait que ce jeune homme célèbre par sa beauté était indifférent à l'amour charnel d'Écho, une nymphe transformée en rocher qui n'était plus qu'une voix répétant les paroles

entendues. Narcisse s'éprit de son image reflétée dans l'eau d'une source limpide, au son de ses propres paroles répétées indistinctement. Ne se doutant pas qu'il se désire lui-même, il se penche sur la surface miroitante et dépérit de désespoir devant son image insaisissable. La fleur qui poussa à l'endroit où il mourut porte son nom.

C'est Leon Battista Alberti qui, dans son traité *De Pictura* (1535), a vu en Narcisse « l'inventeur » de la peinture. Depuis, il a servi d'emblème à cette expérience en peinture où le double prend la place de l'être. Les *Narcisse* des tableaux du Caravage et de Pous-

sin en sont des exemples probants. L. Fontaine fait donc référence au récit d'Ovide et à des tableaux produits antérieurement pour réinventer le mythe à sa manière, non pas en peinture mais par l'intermédiaire d'une installation.

#### LE PARCOURS DE L'INSTALLATION

Le visiteur entre dans la salle d'exposition par une porte située à l'extrême gauche ou à l'extrême droite, selon son trajet dans le musée. Dans les deux cas, il débambule devant une colonnade formée de huit éléments alignés dans le sens de la largeur de la