

R E E N A C T M E N T

B e t w e e n S e l f a n d O t h e r

Carl BEAM

Panya CLARK

Stan DOUGLAS

Janice GURNEY

Barbara LOUNDER

Lani MAESTRO

INTRODUCTION

Barbara FISCHER

This exhibition focuses on the material means by which six contemporary Canadian artists—Carl Beam, Panya Clark, Stan Douglas, Janice Gurney, Barbara Lounder and Lani Maestro—attempt to renegotiate definitions of cultural identity, especially in the context of the art gallery and the museum.

The history of society and culture has always been one of struggle with complex issues of "difference" and "otherness." Rather than simply being questions of national boundaries, however, difference and otherness are defined and instituted within the very fabric of a given culture, whether on the basis of sex and race, or on that of cultural traditions, ethnic customs, and religious beliefs. The "problems" represented by these questions, therefore, must be considered in relation to a particular notion of the individual or collective self. The notion of "self," as invoked in the context of this exhibition, refers not to a self "as one among others," but to the vantage-point of that subject position against which all others are defined as "other."

If art and its various institutions (which include the gallery and the museum) has taken an active part in the construction of cultural difference, recent cultural history is characterized by an unprecedented contesting of the definition of difference. As the assigned identity of "otherness" is contested by those who are subjected to and excluded from its construction, the very limits and boundaries that secure the identity of a privileged subject position have been thrown into question, and the terms of definition of self and other catapulted into crisis.

Through such strategies as mimicry, copying, reconstruction, appropriation and "re-enactment," Beam, Clark, Douglas, Gurney, Lounder and Maestro question the certitudes of identity at the level of the individual and of the objects of knowledge, in order to contest the hierarchies of self and other. Rather than leading to acts of symbolic or physical violence, the uncertainties invited by this "undoing" are welcomed by the artists in *Re-enactment* as offering the possibility of cultural innovation and renewal.

The participants in this exhibition examine issues of cultural difference from a number of very different stances. Panya Clark and Barbara Lounder seek to represent representations of the "Other" as the phantasmagoria of the Western "self." Stan Douglas and Janice Gurney question the exclusiveness of the opposition between self and other by suggesting intermediary positions, in which one is traversed by the other. Lani Maestro and Carl Beam negotiate the division of self itself, as bound up in cultural difference and differing traditions.

Re-enactment describes, then, the operation and process whereby artists are working through issues of cultural difference, and whereby the self is displaced as a centre through language, material, and enunciations which are already of the Other—including culture.

Panya CLARK

Panya Clark's installation takes its title from the motto of the American-based journal, *National Geographic*: "Research and Discovery." Both "research" and "discovery" already indicate a particular relation between a self and an other: the positioning of a subject and an object, a researcher and the researched, a discoverer and a to-be-discovered. Clark's work focuses on the relation between self and other as constructed, maintained and propagated by *National Geographic* magazine in the peculiarly contemporary hybrid of research carried out in the service of knowledge, popular science, and expansive tourism.

Consisting of a small room which, in this exhibition, is an autonomous construction independent of the walls of the surrounding gallery, Clark's installation, like the surrounding gallery itself, houses objects and thereby gives itself as a museum of sorts: a museum-within-a-museum. Within its walls, on top of several pedestals, one finds a number of finely crafted objects, all of which also appear in reproduction: each is pictured on the opened page of a carefully placed accompanying issue of *National Geographic* magazine. Surely, one assumes, these objects are the actual finds which *National Geographic* correspondents, in true museum fashion, have brought back from their research/discovery adventures to add to a strange and exotic collection. Among them are: a child's toy boat with its traces of use in play, here resting sideways next to the page of a glossy magazine which pictures a boy proudly holding the boat up toward the photographer's camera; and a pair of ravishing earrings, shaped like small, decorative baskets, lying next to a photograph of an African woman wearing them.

Much as the installation appears to be a museum of *National Geographic*'s "collection," however, it also relates the "discourse" of the museum to the function of the magazine (or vice versa). Such a relation is established materially by the application of certain design features of the magazine in the construction of the room. For instance, the ornamental yellow band adorning *National Geographic*'s covers is reproduced here in the form of a frieze which frames the entire upper periphery of the room. In addition, the dimensions of the room (that is, its width and depth) correspond in ratio to the format of the magazine. These devices not only call attention to a possible relation between *National Geographic* and, say, a museum of anthropology; they also specify the nature of that relation, namely that the magazine is a contemporary form of the museum—that "Museum Without Walls" which André Malraux declared as having been ushered in by photography. In this museum, reproductions disclose "the whole world's sculpture", all objects in it being turned into "colour-plates" (and promoted to the rank of masterpieces), and in the process losing their properties as objects.¹

If Clark's work establishes the museum's transformation in the changed conditions of the information age, it also re-visits the task of its collector. Instead of concurring with that of the photographer—the collector of images—Clark's function is that of a kind of analyst.

When we turn our attention to the objects on display in this installation, it becomes apparent that they are not what one may initially have assumed to be the actual, "original" objects, as shown in the photographs. As perhaps the desk at the back of the room, with its display of small hand-tools, miscellaneous craft materials, and a stack of opened magazines, shows, the objects on display—the toy boat, the earrings, the small suitcase with its rows of hummingbirds—are actually fabricated anew, not from their originals but from their photographs. It is as though the images had been brought "back to life," their sources having slipped through from beneath the glossy surface into our space and delivered in all their luxurious materiality for us to apprehend.

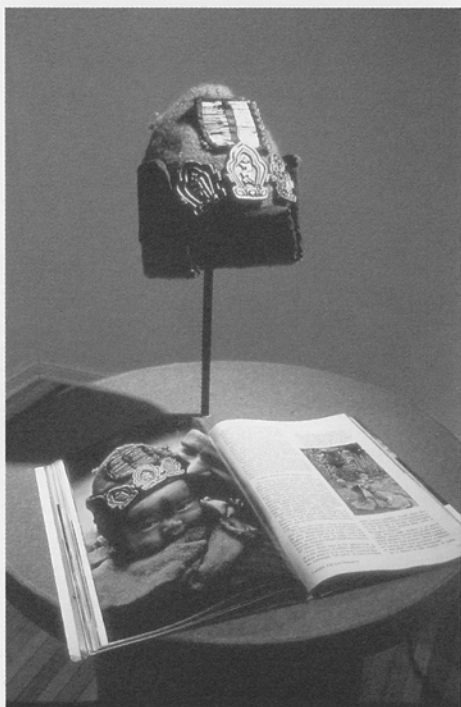
Clark's desiring and "appropriating" gaze is thus turned upon the image, and upon the status of those objects that are only available to us as (and in) images. In returning the image to objecthood—the very status it has lost to photography—Clark's activity has become analogous, perhaps, to that of the archaeologist's, who recreates from the shards and pieces of her buried finds the object that was lost to history. Clark's museum, however, belongs to an archaeology of the information age: her research and her discovering gaze are no longer caught by nature, by the "Other," or by the world, but rather by that which has eclipsed (and thereby will, of course, precede) it: the pictures that constitute the collection of the modern museum.

Rather than recreating a lost past, however, and thereby claiming accuracy and, indeed, identity for this museum's collection, Clark's work is a study of the status of objects of knowledge: those which we imagine to possess in and with the image. Initially, the re-created object seems temporarily to collapse the difference between the object and the image, between the image and its origin, and thus dissimulates its own identity: we are seduced into taking the object to be the one that is pictured. But then, in proportionate measure, the seduction inevitably causes the disturbance of that identity. The objects oscillate, precariously, between authenticity and the inauthentic, and between the same and the not-same before their non-identity, in relation to the objects in the image, prevails. In this oscillation, each object is slowly hollowed out from within, to leave us with its simulacrum—the unsurpassable, final disappearance of the original.

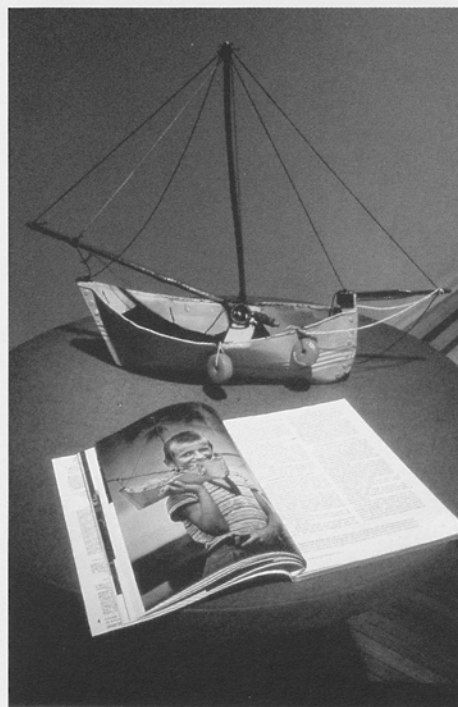
Panya Clark's work is then a transformation of the process that has been referred to as "ingestion": that process whereby another thing, an object that stands opposite to or against oneself, is made "one's own" through representation (including its re-presentation in a foreign context, such as the museum). While her work throws into relief the desire that seeks to make another its own by understanding and penetrating it, this process of "making one's own" here produces a cocoon, the shell of an animal that long has vanished; her objects represent the status of "objects-of-knowledge" as somehow emptied, as having slipped away long ago. Clark's *Research and Discovery* seems to affirm rather than mourn this vanishing: her museum "practice" emphasises the activities of studying (researching) the image, and re-inventing (discovering) the process of making, instead of owning objects through actual and photographic appropriation.



Cat. 3 (a). Panya Clark
Research and Discovery, 1988.
Photo: Panya Clark.



Cat. 3 (b). **Panya Clark**
Research and Discovery (detail: Child's Hat), 1988.
Photo: Panya Clark.



Cat. 3 (c). **Panya Clark**
Research and Discovery (detail: Toy Boat), 1988.
Photo: Panya Clark.



Research and Discovery
 (detail: **African Earrings**), 1988.
 Photo: Panya Clark.



Research and Discovery
 (detail: **Humming Bird Box**), 1988.
 Photo: Panya Clark.