

logocity

**Ron Benner / Peter Bowyer / Corinne Carlson / Robin Collyer / Fastwürms /
Robert Fones / Greg Hefford / Germaine Koh / David Kramer / Arnaud Maggs /
Kelly Mark / Bernie Miller / Max Streicher**

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gallery hours: Sunday to Friday, 1 to 5 pm; Thursday 1 to 9 pm

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As I was once again leafing through Robert Venturi's paperback version of "Learning from Las Vegas" – still poignantly relevant in its analysis – an image caught my eye that, with a sharp pang of sorts, revealed an uncanny relationship to the exhibition "logocity." It was an image of Las Vegas in the 1960s, showing the length of the upper, 6-lane "Strip" lined by the most dense forest of signs a North American city has ever mustered. Each road-side structure is pitched higher than the other in this veritable curtain of letters, sign-shapes, and light posts that signal the "Frontier", MOBIL, Standard, the Desert Inn, among so many others. Clearly distant from the glass curtains of modernist architecture, the signs visually cascade toward the camera's view and signal – primarily to automobile traffic – Rent-a-Car, Hotel, Spectacular Show, and restaurants of every stripe in a very literal version of what is called a "tourist trap."

But all this – the density of this oasis – is visibly set in the desert; beyond the city limits, visually speaking, there is nothing, only the flat, vast, gravel-filled desert and sharp, molar-like mountains in the distance.

How different this image is from the Erindale College, the University of Toronto at Mississauga campus. It is found by way of an understated main entrance access road, nestled in the organic lush brush above the Credit River. Carved out atop the river valley, it features taller, more stately trees, well-kept lawns, discreet sports fields and perhaps less discreet parking lots, and the picturesque, meandering "Five-Minute Walk" which connects the north end of the campus with the South Building, at the other end of the axis. In other words, the University is an oasis of a different kind, a zone free of the structures of competing capital and corporate interests, of companies, businesses, and brands. And if there are signs, they are largely functional: "Parking Lot #3, "North Building", "Student Centre" ... with only the "Kanef Centre" making an acknowledging nod toward this Mississauga Development Company's sponsorship of the 1992 building.

But, it is precisely the University's status as an oasis that has come increasingly under the intrusive gaze of advertising, as Naomi Klein has laid out in a chapter titled "The Branding of Learning," in her recently published book "No Logo." In virtually all educational institutions



the invasive effects of marketing have already taken place, including at Erindale, where debates have raged over ads that are now displayed on almost all washroom doors (in the most private places on campus); and more recently, over the scale of the signs acknowledging corporate supporters of the Student Centre.

So, is the exhibition "logocity" like salt to an open wound, rendering the Five Minute Walk a miniature version of the Las Vegas strip?

Art practice engages advertising in complex ways. For instance, it is a well established fact that, in the historical (pre-industrialized and pre-automobilized) city, visual art – including not only sculpture, but also reliefs, frescoes and mosaics – functioned propagandistically, constructing visual narratives of civic and political history as well as social, religious and cultural identity. Perhaps equally known is the fact that with the advent of modernism, and modernist architecture in particular, art was displaced from that historical role. This was initiated as much by artists, under whose hands sculpture became individual expression and distanced from 'public' purpose, as it was by architects who rejected ornament as



a sort of polluting, non-essential additive. As Venturi put it, when modernist architects "righteously abandoned ornament on buildings, they unconsciously designed buildings that were ornament" and that themselves functioned as symbol.

However, distinct from that once hegemonic style, in the 20th century city it is the billboard and its various manifestations that have taken over the traditional place of art, appearing in conjunction with an architecture that Venturi refers to as "decorated shed." A rich combination of visual and textual sign overshadow a more basic, box-like shelter, beautifying the city with ever more more spectacular mediums including two- and three-dimensional billboards, sign posts, corporate logos, electro-graphics like LED signs and pixel boards (as vivid as television screens), laser beams, projections, giant blow-up figures and others. Of course, what religion was to the temple and the church, and what nationalism was to 19th century state buildings, today it is the affirmation of the market economy that directs the ideological program of the "decorated shed."

This exhibition is at once a response to, and takes as its point of departure from, the city that is inscribed by a multiplying panoply of hybrid sign structures. With the ambivalence and complications that come from taking these as both medium and subject, the artists in this exhibition neither simply enact inscription for the purpose of advertising, nor do they call for a radical removal of any of its signs. Instead, they draw attention to their physical properties, to the sculpturally effective aspects, and to their spatial and symbolic functions. Drawing the spectacular nature of these mediums into the orbit of studio fabrication rather than entertaining mass-production, the works in this exhibition offer accessibility: anyone can make or take over existing forms of communication. Greg Hefford, for instance, adapted a found Muffler shop backlit sign, whereas Max Streicher makes his large-scale inflatable figures from scratch. Sometimes, traces of the home-made are foregrounded emphatically, such as in David Kramer's make-shift construction methods and diminutively scaled billboard. But, if accessibility is an aspect, the purpose of the works in this exhibition is to play with certain established and recognizable forms of public address. The great majority of the works eclipse the expectations for some message. Peter

Bowyer's blank sign or Corinne Carlson's quizzical "Baa?" invert the relation of addresser and addressee, as the screen replaces the message and a question dispenses with the answer. Equally present throughout the exhibition, is the emphasis placed on actual context and physical location. Bernie Miller's "mirror" – like any image – makes a visual hole in the wall, but at the same moment expels the spectator because it shows what lies behind her or him; and Germaine Koh puts up an empty sign post that begins to generate physical traces in its immediate vicinity. The artists pry open the territory of meaning in public space, sometimes by blanking it out altogether, and at other times by taking direct aim at strategies like targeting and branding. With critical observation, often a sense of humour as well, these works put forward puzzles rather than certainties, and present actual situations rather than the promise of yet-to-be-realized purchase.

logocity exhibition map / University of Toronto at Mississauga



Acknowledgements:

Blackwood Gallery Advisory Board:

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Inside Blackwood Gallery:

Robin Collyer
Arnaud Maggs
Kelly Mark
Ron Benner
Robert Fones

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Barbara Fischer, Curator

The Artists' projects:

Ron Benner has always been interested in the flows and effects of power. In "Capital Remains" sweeping changes are rendered visible by the remnants that are left in their wake. A series of nine large-scale b&w photographs of street facades in 1980s Havana show the rusting signs left by American corporations – American Express, Marlborough and others – after their withdrawal from Cuba. At the same time, the work presents the effects of progressing capital interests in Ron Benner's home-town, London, Ontario. Old signs mounted between the photographs and various other debris heaped on the floor, are the remnants the artist found when sections of the older, downtown core were torn down to make room for new developments. In this work, signs are to the city as stakes are to territory. They delineate the local effects of larger capital interests. ("Capital Remains" is on view in the Blackwood Gallery until June 25.)

Peter Bowyer's panoramic drawings often evoke a sense of alienation and idle distance between human inhabitants and architectural environments. These qualities can perhaps also begin to describe the effects of the 16 foot tall, custom-fabricated sign which comes directly out of one of the artist's drawings. With its precarious balance, it presents an immutable, cool and blank surface toward its surroundings. Devoid of any message, this sign functions as a blind eye turned to concrete human endeavours while at the same time evacuating the intrusive nature of advertising, its constant hailing. Appropriately titled "Anything" – as if to say that anything could happen and that therefore, nothing would matter – it represents the disjunction that typically marks the messenger's ad from its actual context. (The work is on view in the entrance hall of the new Student Centre until October 29.)

Advertising is time-conscious, intent on hitting us with a 30-second and less, quick-to-get message rarely leaving room for doubt. **Corinne Carlson** has constructed a 10 x 20 foot large billboard that – instead of making us "get it" – throws back a puzzling expression if not brash question. Made with the spectacular reflecto-lite, a particular brand of loosely suspended reflective disks, the billboard is nothing short of mesmerizing as the sequin-like disks flicker and sparkle like fire and water when hit by wind and light. A popular material for promoting musicals or Pizza-Pizza outlets, its visual appeal is durational and as such contrasts with the onomatopoeic exclamation suspended by a question-mark, "Baa?" Denoting puzzlement, perhaps incomprehension (something to the effect of "what was that? what did you just say?"), this sign inverts the position of messenger and receiver. It invites us to ponder the meaning of a question whilst

dissolving communication in the visual pleasure offered by the material of its medium. ("Baa?" can be seen on the west-end of the North Building, across from the Theatre, until October 29.)

Robin Collyer – in his sculpture and photographs – has always been critically concerned with the architecture of signs, and in particular, with the suffusion of the urban landscape by advertising and the corporate language. "Take Care" (1990) employs the disruptive potential of "montage" through the combined means of image, text and object. Each term is altered through its physical placement in relation to another. The images – of the Berlin Wall and Brandenburg gate on the one side and an upside down ad for Jerry Hall swimsuits on the other – pit a panoply of binaries (East and West, freedom and repression, race and religion) against one another. If the sculptural object, in its function as physical barrier, underlines that apparent construction, it also undercuts it: a diving-board mounted atop an advertising box suggests not so much a leap as a hard fall – which becomes ironic by the Molson beer logo which declares "Take Care", as if beer could. Robin Collyer's new work for logocity utilizes a mobile sign, such as can be found at virtually all major intersections in the suburbs, to present a number of quoted instructions intended for employees in the service industries. They point to the construction of a particular corporate image. ("Take Care" is displayed in the Blackwood Gallery until June 25. The location of the new work is to be determined. It will be on view until October 29.)

Kim Kozzi and Dai Skuse, who work as a team under the pseudonym Fastwürms and consider themselves a part of the Wicca tradition, have long been interested in reading the diverse cultures of nature. The project for Logo City comes from an ongoing series of specially-made vinyl banners, which carry Fastwürms' own brand of signs and arrangement of cryptic codes. Some may need initiation – such as the silhouette of a snake that's inscribed with planetary signs. Others are straightforward subversions, which is to say, incorporations into a different world view altogether. For instance, the red Canadian maple-leaf is turned into a green flag which is given magical powers with the 5-pointed star. The symbols are drawn from mythology – the raven, snake and bat are particularly charged signs – but they are featured in what appears to be a new code. The presence of animals mocks the constructed nature of state borders, nationalisms and similar containments; the unfrozen "snowmyn" with bull's horns (or are they devil's horns), often a fertility symbol, radiates rings of tadpoles thriving in the melt-down of binaries: black and white, male and female, hot and cold, etc. If the inscriptions

elicit the spectre of an ever-encroaching "branding" of nature, the abstraction of the logo comes in handy as an infusion of healing powers against territorial claims: the onomatopoeic "K.A.W." is as much a transcription of the raven's call, as it appears like a corporate logo – only one that is not immediately recognizable (cue: the W. stands for Witches). (Fastwürms work is located on the architectural protrusion on the north-eastern, exterior wall of the Kanef Centre until June 29.)

Robert Fones has, for a long time, been interested in the history and meaning of letter forms in works which combine sculpture, photography and text. In one series of works, especially constructed letter-shapes in various historical fonts are overlaid with a photographic image which, in sometimes oblique ways, capitalizes on aspects of the name or style of the letter.

"Rauschenberg S/Grande Parisienne", consists of a photographic detail of a 1967 Pontiac Grande Parisienne which has been grafted onto a large, sculptural "S", the shape of which was derived from a 1964 work by American Pop artist Robert Rauschenberg, which in turn was based on an ad. From that point, Fones' piece plays with the allusions of its mediums: the blue "underwater" colour of the Grande Parisienne finds an appropriate shape in the flowing shape of the "S"; the actual metal edge of the letter is carried on in the image of car metal; and the trompe l'oeil image of the door handle suggests human scale – we could open the car door as if to go on a trip or to joke about unlocking the meaning of this work as though it was a door – whereas the scale of the letter "S" suggests that it be read from the travelling distance of a cruising car. (Robert Fones' work is presented in the Blackwood Gallery until June 25.)

Greg Hefford's work in logocity consists of a large, two-sided illuminated sign in the shape of a "Speech Bubble." Initially conceived for use near the Gardiner Expressway, that increasingly spectacular corridor of media structures snaking its way through downtown Toronto, the blank sign would clearly distinguish itself from these in its very literal "speechlessness." Shown in various contexts before – here in a particularly bleak, almost completely isolated setting – the indexical work suggests that the surrounding situation is a ghost about to speak, about to emit a message. Instead of presenting a determined message, one that would hi-jack its meaning, the empty sign affirms the 'here and now' in which it is found. The sign illuminates its own surroundings and still maintains that situation as one yet-to-be-articulated. The place could speak or be spoken for, but the expression would be different with every visitor and every day. As a blank there is only an imaginary mes-

sage; the sign is a screen for such thoughts. (The work is located at the top of the stairwell off the Smoker's Corner at the South Building until October 29.)

"Who is Anthony Mason anyway" New York artist **David Kramer** has long been interested in common roadside advertising structures, especially their visual appeal, tidbits of glamour and cult of celebrity. His steel construction mimes old-fashioned signs except in scale and message. Somewhat diminutive – next to it one becomes large – it spells out the name of an American basketball player who, in actuality, is known to only the most diligent followers of the game. In fact, he is a rather unlikely (because too rough and rowdy) candidate for corporate sponsorship, endorsements and publicity. No matter, even though we now have an answer, the work still performs the irony of its title "Household Name." For, the sign remains puzzling, not so much because we might not know who Mason is, but because the sign suggests we should or should have known. The reversal between the sign's declarative nature on the one hand, and the obscurity of the man on the other, points to the intricate relation between the sign's ability to produce, yet need celebrity. David Kramer's quirky, very obviously home-made structure (put together from bits and pieces in odd, almost incomprehensible angles) describes how that very relation is a game that just about anybody can play. (The work is on the patio of the former Blind Duck Pub until October 29.)

In contrast to almost all the other works in this exhibition, **Germaine Koh's** work will probably go unnoticed – unless it is read about here or somewhere else. Entitled "Poll", it consists of a fence post (or sign post without a sign) that is planted into the middle of a short cut across the lawn. During the exhibition, the formerly single lane will become a forked path which signifies an organic "poll": those who walk the path after the post has been planted will choose to avoid the obstacle and pass by either the right or left hand side. Inevitably, one side of the lawn will be marked by a more visible path than the other. As Germaine Koh has put it, the work "examines how an environment is shaped by the actions that occur within it, and also how these actions respond to the 'planned' organization of space... [Poll] looks at the unofficial way everyday activity adapts itself to, and at the same time reclaims, official space through things like short cuts. The pole is a kind of sign, or marker, that simply asks us to pay attention to what is happening in that particular place." And, as we might add, it points to the very real interaction with structures that otherwise function to deter or defer, i.e. the 'here and now' in favour of a suspended "there" (by way of the fence or of the function of the advertising sign). ("Poll" can be found on the

south-east lawn between the South Building and the Kaneff Centre until October 29.)

Arnaud Maggs is represented in the exhibition with a maquette of one of his very well-known works: a series of large photographs of Parisian hotel signs that mimic the vertical shape of the very subject they represent. Organized into four horizontal panels, the maquette presents over one hundred small-scale versions of these vertical "Hotel" signs like specimens in the taxonomic grid of scientific tables. With their direct reference and simple function, and in the context of the city, the signs would have all appeared the same and simply read as a message. They may be notable in their contrast to the more spectacular nature and visual acuity of contemporary identifying logos (including those of hotels or motels, such as "Quality Inn", "Sheraton", "Howard Johnson", etc.). The maquette, however, is laid out to highlight the differences and the particularities of seemingly identical signs, which begins with their separation and classification into four categories – serif, sans-serif, decorative, and b&w reversed. (The work will be on view in the Blackwood Gallery until June 25.)

Kelly Mark has for quite a while been interested in the signs that ordinary people make. "Sunboxes" (1999), for instance, is a photographic taxonomy of the stickers and notes that people have attached to the red newspaper boxes of the Toronto Sun which can be found at virtually every street corner in downtown Toronto. They are small-scale interventions in the business of big-time newspaper corporations. Her new work for logocity consists of a series of "spinners" – portable, wind-driven signs that are found along streets to advertise sales or car washes amongst other things. Titled "Fortunes", Kelly Mark's signs deliver "little truisms or 'sage' advice" that the artist discovered in Chinese Fortune cookies: "Not every question deserves an answer", "You find beauty in ordinary things", and "You are talented in many ways." Split up into the to and fro sides of the sign, the fortunes churn out their own gambler's logic. The fortune comes free – sometimes as a question, then as an incomplete address – on account of various weather conditions, or rather, of the caprice and chance occurrence that is the trademark of wind. (The signs will be on view until October 29 in a location to be determined.)

Bernie Miller has worked with sculptural sign structures for over 25 years. His project for UTM will consist of a wall-mounted, illuminated billboard which, against the expectation of the medium, presents a rather ordinary image of its surroundings. More particularly, titled "Five Minute Mirror", the image actually appears to reflect the setting in front of it. For someone approach-

ing it, it will seem to contain the scenery that one is passing through or that one is leaving behind. However, unlike a mirror, the image is completely still and it does not reflect us who are looking into it. As the artist put it, "in front of it, we're all like Dracula", or like a ghost: invisible to all but ourselves. In a sense, the image underlines the gap between itself and what, supposedly, it "reflects." It also draws attention to the gap between itself and images that are intended for our identification – whereby we could become the image with a particular purchase or product of course. (The work is located in the Smokers' Corner at the South Building until October 29.)

Max Streicher has become known for his construction of large, inflated figures which may be presented in, or more recently, outdoors as well. Initially inspired by Wegee's 1930s photograph of workers busying around an inflatable Santa Claus figure for Macy's Parade, Max Streicher's figures also mimic the scale and material nature of more recent, inflatable advertising signs like the Michelin Man or the Seven Eleven's "Large Gulp." The work not only effects a sense of physical displacement (it diminishes the scale of the surrounding environment and the viewer's body), the two giant heads on top of the roof of the University's Kaneff Centre also suspend the definite purpose of advertising's meanings. Gazing into the sky, the heads slightly sway as if between amazement and perplexity, between a sense of abandonment and of idleness concerning purpose, which is perhaps why the work is named "Endgame", after Beckett's play. ("Endgame" can be found on top of the roof of the Blackwood Gallery, at the North-East corner of the Kaneff Centre, until October 29.)

Barbara Fischer

in collaboration with the students of the Curatorial Practice class.