

Annette Hurtig / CAROLE ITTER'S UNCANNY RECUPERATION OF THE MEANING OF WOOD

Wooden objects gathered from refuse are Carole Itter's obsession, and in her recent assemblage works, her primary media. Itter's friends and family assist with the collection of material. Bows, spoons, book ends, balusters, picture frames, shoe trees, and so forth are rescued from back alleys and thrift shops. Carole Itter eventually transforms these discards. Her pleasure in reviving this detritus of the city constitutes her mode of opposition to the various forces of alienation at work in the dominant culture. Her assemblage practice denies the market place—its endless production and consumption of goods, insatiable desire for spectacle, and fascination with shiny impenetrable surfaces which are heralded as emblematic of technological and therefore social progress. Carole Itter's choice of material makes her assemblage works inherently subversive; they are statements of concern for local and global ecologies, as well as indictments of corporate hegemony.

The scale and configurations of her assemblages evoke something totemic suggesting pre-industrial landscapes resplendent with fertile soil, towering forests, benevolent winds, replenishing water and a nourishing sun. But, paradoxically, they can also seem mechanistic and evocative of a bloody futurist revivalism. In the context of late-capitalist consumer culture, Carole Itter's assemblages are uncanny reminders of opposing realities. They are simultaneously celebration and lament: ceremonial transfigurations in honour of mother earth in a state of grace prior to our contemporary environmental crises.

As a product of her time and locale, Carole Itter is exemplary of the vital collaborative and interdisciplinary traditions which flourished in this region during the late 60s and the 70s. In that era Vancouver enjoyed a flurry of cultural activity that welcomed and explored international currents, while evolving those strains and schools we now recognize as important regional inflections. From this specific history, Carole Itter developed into a multi-disciplinary artist whose accomplishments include: published prose and poetry in monographs, periodicals and anthologies; the gathering and publication of aural histories; participation in community projects

and interventions; voice improvisation and sound poetry collaborations; film and video productions; photography; costumes and slide projections for multi-media performances with her companion and colleague, Al Neil; as well as collage and assemblage works.

In his seminal essay "Terminal City: Place, Culture And The Regional Inflection" for the *Vancouver Art and Artists: 1931-1983* catalogue, Scott Watson singles out Itter's early performance piece *Personal Baggage* (1972) as

key in defining what has been particular about Vancouver art. This piece involved the transportation of a cedar log from Roberts Creek [British Columbia] to Lockport [Nova Scotia]. Many artists were involved in the project, as were townships, trains and post offices. The image was innocent, but the piece was not. The work's importance lies in the working people who were modified by having to deal with a benevolent irrationality and a non-confrontational subversion. Whatever [this] work owe[s] to international strategies, such as minimalism and conceptualism, [it] remains passionately contextual.

Itter subsequently produced *The Log's Log*, a publication that documents in photos and text the log's preparation and progress across the country. Her choice of material then, the west coast's ubiquitous cedar beach log, prefigured her current use of wooden objects as signifiers for this locale in particular, but also as symbols of concern for the global elemental environment.

In the 80s Carole Itter's visual art has been the construction of large scale assemblages made from the wooden objects she collects. In her assemblage works individual articles retain their material essence while also functioning as indices of the domestic realm, earth's natural resources, and a conscious economy of production. And, in congregation, the recuperated wooden objects' multivalence includes: irreverence for traditional high art tenets; reaffirmation of the importance of pleasure in process and materials; and an implicit critique of and resistance to the forces of commodification and consumerism. Moreover, there is a call for active engagement in environmental conservation. Even in methodology — the long processes of collection and construction — these works eschew current notions of value assessed in exclusively economic terms without regard for long term or residual consequences. Carole Itter's assemblage projects are labour intensive meditations on the meanings of wood.

Whether in vertical form (*Choir of Rattles* 1985 and *Winter Garden* 1988) or horizontal (*Long Assemblage* 1987 and *Western Blue Rampage* 1989), her assemblages have a fantastic quality generated by their ability to evoke both an idyllic past and a dismal future. In his essay on literary fantasy and its psychological implications, Freud argued that the fantastic exposes what is usually obscured due to cultural constraints; and, that by doing so, it transforms the familiar into the vaguely disconcerting.¹ Thus *das Unheimliche* (the uncanny) describes inherent alienation from a world perceived as sinister, and also the act of unveiling that which is normally hidden. In psychoanalytic terms, this buried realm consists of desire itself, essentially insatiable and necessarily grounded in absence. The antonym, *das Heimliche*, could therefore be applied to the combination of the familiar (such as domestic comfort) with a reference to something concealed. Carole Itter's assemblages function as alluring mises-en-scene which contain the dialectic of heimliche/unheimliche. They are full of associations with absence: ecological extinctions and depletions that are real physical absences; and constructed voids, the fictitious absences contrived by advertising in order to create desire. Itter means to reveal the fictions while implicating the viewer who is called on both as witness to the complex and often absurd processes of environmental destruction, and as accomplice in an indictment of the perpetrators.

Consider *Winter Garden*, perhaps Itter's most haunting assemblage to date. The domestic and bucolic comfort it might at first conjure is eventually displaced by an uncanny prediction for the future. Of variable dimensions (depending on the installation site), it consists of sixteen vertical stained white rattles, together with 200 slides, two slide projectors and a slide dissolve unit. Absence of colour makes the rattles look like conglomerations of bones. Their anthropomorphic shape suggests larger-than-life human skeletons. Installed in close proximity to each other, the cluster would seem to be a family or tribe. Details of individual objects are muted, indecipherable from a distance, so that the gathering is ghostly, insubstantial, a little menacing, but also seductive in its mystery. The projection devices throw dissolving photographic images of botanical growth onto the rattles; when in operation, they effect a boundary that keeps the viewer at a distance from the sculpture. The slide images

¹ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 17, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1933), 217-251.

encompass the rattles and the walls and ceiling beyond it. Indeed, each set of images completely transforms the rattles while encasing them, as in a habitat or *situ*. The slides vary in content from deep green coniferous branches which effect a cool meditative environ, to marigold blossoms which transfigure the rattles into blood-soaked avenging warriors. *Winter Garden* thereby incorporates a dialectic of effects. Its antitheses run parallel, but in direct opposition to, the appearance/reality dichotomy advertising plays on in its bid to construct the uncritical consumer. By pointing to those actual absences attributable to the corporate hegemony's construction of a global culture characterized by unbridled consumption, Itter works to reveal advertising's fabrication of desire.

Itter's most recent project, *Western Blue Rampage*, similarly recalls Freud's account of the mind's dream mechanisms, namely condensation and displacement.² As in previous works, the visual economy of this assemblage operates on the basis of memory and association. In *Western Blue Rampage* a spill of wooden objects painted forest green is backed by a sky blue wall. The irregular surface of the spill reads as landscape: hills, mountains, valleys. Plastic-laminated colour laser reproductions of photographs of west coast forest are doubled back to front, stuffed, and bound with green garden twine; they resemble the kitsch souvenir pillows collected by tourists. The pillows are intentionally awkward and obviously disparate. Their inclusion signals the contemporary human presence in, and out relationship to, the natural world. The pillows also function as metaphors for sleep and dreams, and thereby as signifiers of the unconscious. The hyper-mediated images refer to cultural industries and mass media's pervasive influence—a phenomenon to which cultural theorists attribute the dissolution of previous criteria defining reality and artifice:

Life in the societies hegemonized by modern conditions of production presents itself as an enormous accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was once directly experienced now recedes into representation. . . . Spectacle isn't a group of images, but a social relationship mediated by images. . . . Spectacle is the moment in which merchandise achieves the total occupation of social life. Our relationship to merchandise ceases to be visible since it is the only thing in fact we see: the visible world and the world of merchandise become totally identified.

(Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Paris, 1967)

² Sigmund Freud, *On Dreams*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1980), 41-63.

Western Blue Rampage suggests that advertisements depicting “nature” are such simulacra, dark spectacles which lull us into insouciance.

With this conjunction of a nostalgic blue mood and a nightmarish vision of the present and future, Itter intends the assemblage to awaken us from somnambulism into conscious action. She shares with other artists a desire to encourage thought and affirm the possibility of change, in spite of contrary value systems and enormous economic forces. Without rhetoric or political polemic, Itter engages the humble found wooden object as her most significant asset in this challenging task.

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