

Julia Feyrer
The Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar
ARTSPEAK, Vancouver

Bar interiors suggest strange adventures; improvised gatherings hold out the promise of fresh human contacts; sudden shifts of scene are pregnant with unforeseeable possibilities... where the bare schemata of things threaten to supersede the things themselves—with images of life as such glittering, allusive, infinite life - Siegfried Kracauer (from Theory of Film, 1960)

An old microfiche viewer, similar to the ones once common in libraries and archives, sits in the window of ARTSPEAK. Facing onto Carrall St. in Gastown, it displays a typewritten document describing a nearby 1890's era drinking establishment called the Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar. The text focuses on the bar's unique interior design made of "almost every kind of bark, cedar bark, vine, maple twigs, moss and fungus, etc." In the late 19th century Vancouver's Gastown was developed around a lumber mill, and grew into what was considered a rowdy resort area for off-work lumbermen, loggers and other industry workers. One of the drinking establishments was the Poodle Dog. Through archival research Julia Feyrer discovered the aforementioned descriptive text along with a black and white photograph of the original Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar. The image is tightly cropped and looks towards the back of the room. A perspectival view firmly directs the eye along the bar and its opposite wall of bark and twigs towards a door in the back wall. The door is closed.

Feyrer took this image and reconstructed it in a Vancouver backyard as a film set, with her own frontier decorations of found scrap wood and cedar bark. However, she didn't model her structure on an approximation of what the bar would have looked like using the photograph as a reference, rather she modeled it on the photograph directly. The walls in her version of the bar actually point inward themselves converging at the back of the set and whatever was not included in the original photograph was just left as open backyard. She built photographic exclusion and distortion into the set itself. The door is open.

To activate the set Feyrer periodically invited off-work artists, musicians and other cultural workers to interact and perform in the space. Throughout the summer Feyrer could be seen greeting visitors and serving her home-made *Apfelwein* or with a 16mm camera covering part of her face as she gathered material for her film. Her camera-masked face is in the film too, as she pointed it at mirrors from time to time.

In the original photograph of the bar there is a large mirror behind the counter reminiscent of the one depicted in Edouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergères* (1881–82), but in the *Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar* set, and the film itself, the gaze is fragmented. The mirror is broken and placed in and around the set. These broken mirrors were both cast and crew, as they were used to reflect light as well as being present in many of the shots.

Fragmentation was built into *The Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar* project from the start. Feyrer radically decontextualized a space that was precariously clinging to historical presence. Starting from the particularities of a photograph and a short description, her intent was not to further illuminate the nearly forgotten, but to reimagine it.

Feyrer's film itself is both totally controlled and totally out of control. She allowed for the contingencies of loosely orchestrated events, and shot many of the scenes on a wind up Bolex 16mm camera that was only capable of shooting thirty seconds of film in a row. As a looped film projector inside ARTSPEAK chatters celluloid through its sprockets, flash frames and other uncertainties of film pop up amongst a montage of carefully considered compositions driven by a rhythmic soundtrack that seems to drift in and out of synch. Dream-like images of musical performances, floating cedar bark dust, garden hose rain showers, poetry readings and abandoned dog sculptures flash by. Finally the film settles on a wide shot of the set in its entirety and with a sense of total control the set collapses in upon itself; a slapstick *Zabriskie Point*.

In attempt to avoid "Vulgar Historical Naturalism" Walter Benjamin proposed supplanting the practice of filmic montage onto historical method. "That is, to assemble large scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event."¹ Feyrer employs filmic montage, not as a model for historical method, but as means of tugging on historical dead ends while simultaneously starting new leads. However, her fragmentation inherently points back to the original photographic fragment, and perhaps illuminates the original Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar's position so that it may be reinserted into a new flow of images. By making a film with the Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar as its protagonist, she brings attention to the first thing needed to begin a process of historical redemption: a name.

