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THE POODLE DOG ORNAMENTAL BAR AND  
VANCOUVER'S SUBTRACTED FUTURE

Michael Turner on Julia Feyrer

Julia Feyrer, *The Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar*,  
[production still], 2009

Cuts to public funding bring to mind institutions reliant on public funds. When threatened, these institutions remind us of their relevance by highlighting past accomplishments. As applied to the visual arts, rarely do public galleries and museums speak of themselves as anthologies of past cuts, nor do they script their futures with the expectation of further subtractions, be that the loss of an exhibition publication or the exhibition altogether.

Looking to the future (at the expense of the past) is a Vancouver behaviour that began with the fur trade (followed by mining, fishing, forestry, and, most recently, real estate speculation). Yet in looking to this future, this subtracted future common to public and private institutions alike, what do we make of that which will no longer happen? What methods are not in place to archive such subtractions? And why is it that when galleries and museums are threatened, the first line of defense is more often than not what these galleries and museums have already contributed, as opposed to what they propose to do?

Though I am writing on the occasion of Julia Feyrer's exhibition at Artspeak, I am doing so at a time when the British Columbia government has not only cut public funding to the arts, it has erased the word "art" from the ministry responsible for its health and welfare. Meanwhile, the commodification of art continues, as does the trend towards artist collectives, relational practices, alternative spaces, and, dare I say it, indifference by emerging artists towards state-supported artist-run centres (ARCs). I will try to address these concurrences in the context of this essay. Not at the expense of Feyrer's exhibition, but to show how the content and production of this exhibition relates to our present condition.

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Julia Feyrer's *The Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar* (2009)

is a 9-minute film and was, at one point, an installation based on a recreation of a late 19th century Vancouver bar on the 300-block of West Cordova Street. Put another way, *The Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar* is a continuum that began with the enigmatic (and seemingly ironically named) 1890s bar, and was brought into focus over a century later by Feyrer who encountered an archival photo of the bar's vacant interior and imagined a stage and a script, both of which were made, one of which was subtracted.

In constructing her bar, Feyrer was true to the materials of her source image, using "cedar bark, vine maple twigs, moss and fungus,"<sup>1</sup> just as the proprietors of the first Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar had done. However, whereas her predecessors had likely sourced their materials from nearby Hastings Mill, Feyrer, who had chosen to site her bar in a residential backyard between Main and Fraser Streets, travelled as far north as Squamish, a journey that tells us a lot about how the city's economic base has shifted from primary to tertiary industries. What she could not find in Squamish she found on Craigslist.

Once built, the bar came to life as a gathering place for consumers of Feyrer's wine (made from the yard's apple trees), musical and literary performances, and, eventually, the setting for her film. Although the film was shot, Feyrer was indifferent to the result. My attempt to pursue her indifference was met with further indifference, something I am grateful for. To have settled on a definitive response might have ended a line of inquiry that had me considering whether the activities that occurred in advance of the shooting had transformed the site from an artificial setting to something organic, much like Pinocchio, who became a boy not because of an artist's love of his puppet creation but through the puppet's accumulation of moral lessons. The transformation of the site from film set to medium enacts its own narrative. Why supply another?

Feyrer's script is the apocryphal center of *The Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar*, what the future of the work was supposed to look like upon seeing the archival photo that led to its inspiration. It is not important that we know this, and yet it represents a stage in the development of the work. A parallel can be found in the materials used to construct the first Poodle Dog: that which was deemed extraneous to the commodification of "forest products" (whatever could not be sold to city builders) and how these "waste" products supplied the bar its "finished" surface, an inversion I find intriguing. Indeed, what behooved the proprietors to use these materials allows for new narratives, such as the ones Feyrer might have considered when inspired to write her script.

If the original script was conceived as a narrative, the resultant film owes more to the work of Stan Brakhage, Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1966), and, in its "failure" as a narrative, Dennis Hopper's *The Last Movie* (1971). From the start we are made aware that the subject of the film (as with any film that begins and ends with credits) is its production, with the artist and her camera appearing in one of the bar's many mirrors (some hanging, some held, others in fragments upon the ground), a gesture that is repeated throughout. Focal tests are also included, as are explorations of multiple exposures relative to light and shadow. The deliberately out-of-synch audio track is supplied by sounds generated on site, whether "live" or pre-recorded, musical or spoken, Edwardian or modern, exotic or banal. The editing is reminiscent of the collagist strategies associated with "experimental" film.

Occasionally, one gets the sense that certain sequences are related to the film Feyrer had intended to make, with actors waiting by light stands, their lines and actions memorized, internalized. These scenes do not last long, but they recur often enough to remind us of something other than what we have been

seeing. Though concealed from the viewer, the actors' lines and actions are assumed based on the presence of cinematic tools (props, those aforementioned light stands), a presence that allows us to speak of these unavailable "scenes" as being "earned", as they say in screenwriting workshops. For me, these unseen "scenes" also belong to the subtracted future.

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As a continuum, Feyrer's *The Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar* is evocative of two earlier independent (non-institutional) activities set in the Lower Mainland: Michael Morris and Vincent Trasov's *Colour Bar Research* (1967-1971) and Jacob Gleeson and Gareth Moore's *St. George Marsh* (2005-2006). *Colour Bar Research* was a back-to-basics project that had interdisciplinary artists painting rainbow-coloured wooden blocks in the pastoral setting of Robert's Creek's "Babyland", while *St. George Marsh* was a non-funded concept shop and artist studio situated in a residential neighbourhood in East Vancouver. Over time, these projects expanded to include new forms. *St. George Marsh* shipped its "inventory" to the loading dock of a private gallery (Catriona Jeffries Gallery), where it was offered for sale, then to a university gallery (the Belkin Satellite), where the contents were reconfigured into an inhabitable work of sculpture, while *Colour Bar Research* came to include a non-narrative 8mm film, notable for arcadian merriment and Morris's difficult-to-decipher monologue set to booms of floating bars. Although distinct from these works, Feyrer's *The Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar* resembles *St. George Marsh*, in the first instance, and *Colour Bar Research*, in the second.

Feyrer's project, like Gleeson and Moore's, began as a node of social exchange, where you could take in a performance, contribute (to) one, or buy things. In visiting these sites, I was struck by the number of younger artists I met who did not directly participate

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ARTSPEAK  
233 CARRALL ST  
VANCOUVER, BC  
CANADA  
V6B 2J2

CONTACT  
T 604 688 0051  
F 604 685 1912  
E INFO@ARTSPEAK.CA  
W WWW.ARTSPEAK.CA



Interior of Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar on Cordova between Cambie and Abbott Streets, ca. 1898, City of Vancouver Archives, Hot P5

in state-supported artist-run culture. Indeed, not only were these young men and women indifferent to artist-run centres (seeing them as remnants of an older generation, an older agenda, with no room for their futures), many had never even heard of them. Reid Shier alludes to this in his 2007 essay "Do Artists Need Artist-Run Centres?"<sup>2</sup> in which he talks about the directors of three ARCs coming not from studio practices but from backgrounds in art history and curatorial studies. Perhaps most relevant to this discussion, Shier cites White Columns' Director/Curator Matthew Higgs, who, when speaking of younger artists "sucking up" to the mainstream art world (which, for him, includes ARCs), has this to say: "[I]f they were really smart, they would create their own."<sup>3</sup> For a time, *The Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar* and *St. George Marsh* appeared to be doing just that.

Although Feyrer's bar was built for her film, the film produced by Morris and Trasov was less an outcome than a parallel expression of colour bar activity, a screen test not for the bars as subjects but the film medium's (in)ability to represent the painted colour spectrum, where form, not content, takes centre stage. This privileging of cinematic form over narrative content is evident in Feyrer's film, for instead of pursuing a script based on her narrativization of the original Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar, the artist chose instead to focus on the spontaneity generated by her bar as a forum for the practices and interactions of artists inside and outside the established venue system. Feyrer emphasized a compositional regime closer to the synaptic exchanges of the brain than what is made visible through the actions brains excite, like the writing of scripts (or participation in state-supported artist-run culture). If the passage of *St. George Marsh* from corner shop to gallery installation implies an unfortunate subtraction (the loss of the shop as a social nexus), the subtraction of Feyrer's narrative script from the resultant film achieves the opposite effect: one attentive to its present, yet

inspired by its past.

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Is it important that we know the histories of what did not happen? In consideration of such histories, in this box-set added-features world we live in, is it important that we know the nature of Feyrer's script, or is it enough to know that it existed and, perhaps as a result of what it did not contain, had bearing on the artist's decision to kill it (and thus provide *The Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar* its guiding spirit)?

Although every gallery and museum has stories of what had been planned but did not happen, I have yet to hear one. This is not to say that such stories are never told, only that they are not part of the conversations I find myself overhearing (which is how I came to hear of Feyrer's script). But if there are histories of that which did not happen, one might find evidence of them on Artspeak's backroom bookshelf, where there stands an editioned series based on artists' ideas for unrealized art works, a revenue generator instigated some years back by Director/Curator Lorna Brown and reprised more recently by her successor Melanie O'Brian. Some of these ideas are impossible to realize, while others might still be in development, ideas whose time has not yet come.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> City of Vancouver Archives AM0054.013.06565 (description of the Poodle Dog's construction).

<sup>2</sup> Reid Shier, "Do Artists Need Artist-Run Centres," *Vancouver Art & Economies*, ed. Melanie O'Brian (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press/Artspeak, 2007): 189.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

Michael Turner is a Vancouver-based writer of fiction, criticism, and song.

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ARTSPEAK  
233 CARRALL ST  
VANCOUVER, BC  
CANADA  
V6B 2J2

CONTACT  
T 604 688 0051  
F 604 685 1912  
E INFO@ARTSPEAK.CA  
W WWW.ARTSPEAK.CA