

In My Neighbourhood. The Convenience Gallery

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In My Neighbourhood —THE CONVENIENCE GALLERY

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The contemporary gallery, though an indispensable institution within the official economy of the art system, has often been negatively regarded by some for its bracketing and domesticating art from the messy currents of life. Certainly, the history of contemporary art documents a host of architectural, interventionist and activist projects that launch their polemic through a critique of the gallery, in particular its homogenizing and alienating effect on art and life.

Given the history of this critique and the on-going complication of art with architecture, urbanism and activism, it is possible to position the gallery differently. By having the gallery evacuated from its institutional frame, it is possible to work through some of the gallery's alienating effect and embed it within an evolving urban dynamics. This would however, entail the gallery to implicate itself in the rhythm and syntax of urban life on the one hand, and to propose new

project space. Sorli and Trevisan own a three-storey building as a live/work space. The ground floor of the building was formerly a neighbourhood convenience store. They have adapted the former storefront as a 24/7 display window. To date, a series of exhibitions by artists, architects and designers have been staged, each opening on the night of a new moon and lasting approximately one month.

Being somewhat familiar with Sorli's and Trevisan's practice, I understand that preserving the history of the site is an important directive. Therefore, both the original storefront window and the mostly faded but still visible red shop sign with the word "convenience" are kept as they were. Aside from these original fixtures, there is no announcement or visible sign that indicates the storefront window is actually a contemporary art project space. The artworks are simply viewed from the street, minus the bracketing effect of the gallery, as a part of the "urban landscape." As it stands, the projects are primarily delivered as "displays," their status similar to the many window displays in the neighbour-

hood, then secondarily as art. definitive sense of energy and novelty to its milieu. A short dialectic text is usually placed within the window to accompany the project. Beyond this Sorli and Trevisan did not explicitly institute a mission or mandate. Still the tone of the gallery is evident from the way it is set up. Most exhibitors intuitively take advantage of the gallery's contingency within a diverse neighbourhood and create works that actively engage with the urban and social fabric. Below are my reflections on a few of them.

In my opinion, Robert Labossière's project, entitled *Payday*, currently on view during the time of writing this text, is especially successful. Labossière dressed the storefront gallery with the familiar neon signs and graphics that are typical of a cash store. At first glance, this mock-up can really fool the eye. It is entirely plausible that such a store could be operating at this location. Parkdale is a low-income neighbourhood and there are certainly a number of cash stores around. It is understood that this type of "cash store" blatantly preys on the financial predicament of the

tography to enhance and signify the freshness of the product. For his installation at the Convenience, such a convention is exaggerated in scale to fill up the entire storefront window. The large water drops on the photograph reflect a past installation on the same site. The photograph is thus inscribed within both the location and history of the gallery. This gesture of folding back the work onto the site simultaneously re-marks and displaces the window/threshold of the site.

My own installation entitled *Motto* was launched in November 2007. It is a text-based work that derives its source from the convention of street propaganda—the "big letter news" during the Cultural Revolution in China. The text, "When there is free food eat eat eat. When there is a good battle fight fight fight" is a slogan that, with its militaristic tone and red color, is reminiscent of those posted everywhere during the Cultural Revolution. *Motto* originated from an email exchange between myself and Xia Jie, a resident in Beijing whom I met during my research on Hutong houses in that city. Xia Jie had won the first court case in China



opportunities to intervene on the urban fabric on the other. To a large extent, the success of such a gallery hinges on not only where but equally on how it is situated. Location, orientation and programming should work together to mobilize the gallery as an effective urban gesture.

I speak of the Convenience Gallery in Toronto as an example. Located in the culturally diverse and densely populated neighbourhood of Parkdale in the west side of Toronto, The Convenience Gallery is an initiative by two architects/designers/artists Scott Sorli and Flavio Trevisan. It has been operating out of a former storefront window since its inaugural exhibition in the fall of 2006. But rather than calling it a gallery, the Convenience is more appropriately described as a

hood, then secondarily as art.

Yet, this innocuous but deliberate gesture to preserve the site (it is more like leaving it alone) proves to be most effective. It downplays the framing condition of the gallery. As a result, the projects can be quietly instigated into the life of the neighbourhood, as a part of the "scene." The Convenience's "displays" are able to engage in a lively dialogue with the daily activities of the neighbourhood, as well as its history and on-going transformation. During the past year, the Convenience Gallery has lodged itself as a familiar signpost of the neighbourhood (I live just up the street and have not missed a show). One can indeed view the artwork either on foot or drive by without ever stepping out of the car. The projects vary a great deal, and they infuse a

"have-nots," trapping them in a permanent cycle of debt. In fact, Labossière is reacting to the fact that two such cash stores have recently opened in his own neighbourhood, just a little east of Parkdale. Hence, *Payday*, a strategic doubling of the stereotypical cash store, indexes and intensifies the perversity of such an operation. When approached in close-up, the viewer can read related statistical information presented on panels that are not obvious from afar.

Another successful work is Robert Fones' *Drops* in 2007. *Drops* is a large-scale photograph measured to the same dimension as the display windows at the Convenience. It is directly mounted onto the backside of window. Here Fones was interested in the use of water drops in product pho-

to stop demolition of her Hutong house by private developers and her unique story has received world-wide coverage. A Hutong house is the kind of tight knitted traditional courtyard house that has sustained Chinese values and forms of life for centuries. It is from one of our email exchanges that Xia Jie told me in the midst of the court battle, the developers had changed their attitude and invited her for a "friendly discussion" over dinner at an expensive French restaurant. She then declared her motto, which originally read, "When there is a good battle I fight. When there is free food I eat." ←

Yam LAU is an artist and writer based in Toronto. He teaches painting at York University and is represented by the Leo Kamen Gallery. His most recent exhibitions include *Room at Optica* and *Scapeland II* at YZ Artists' Outlet.

From left to right: *Motto* (Yam Lau), *Drops* (Robert Fones), *Payday* (Robert Labossière)
Photo: courtesy of the Convenience Gallery.