

Vessna Perunovich

Red E Scape

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century "masters": Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, and Claudio Rivera-Seguel. The Canadian-Chilean's alliance of himself with these once radical artists, was a testament to their collective influence upon his work and the ability of mainstream cultural institutions to co-opt the avant-garde.

In many respects Claudio Rivera-Seguel's *LUZ=LUZ* international project in Fredericton, Paris, and Santiago mark both a culmination and shift in his art of the 1990s. The trajectory of his work thus far is linked by a tendency towards socio-political posturing, which has taken the form of public actions as well as installations. He routinely rejects the fundamental tenets of late Capitalism, and employs art to reveal the less attractive realities of Western cultural phenomenon. This attitude has been informed by the human tragedies he has witnessed in Chile, and the fine line that this artist perceives between military dictatorship and liberal democracy. Mass media forms are used as tools against a range of middle-

class assumptions, which the artist alters in a multi-linguistic and symbolic process.

The nomadic Chilean-Canadian has rarely applied in advance or been selected by a gallery or cultural institution for the many shows he has participated in over the past decade. Rather, Rivera-Seguel prefers to organize his own shows and issue catalogues based on the locations and resources at hand in any given city across three continents. Such artistic autonomy is a necessary part of his unsettled lifestyle, and it has enabled him to develop a very sophisticated aesthetic of survival. Urban refuse in its many forms is the basic vocabulary of his performance and architectonic-based creations, providing viewers with glaring examples of how Western societies are incessantly manufacturing, over consuming, and then carelessly discarding the planet's resources. However, the highly produced new objects in *LUZ=LUZ*, including massive banners, t-shirts, key chains, posters, and cards are signs of the artist's recent efforts to extend his

manipulation of formats as well as spaces into the realm of pure mimicry. Rivera-Seguel's electronic messages on a public sign board in Fredericton, posters on media boards in metros throughout Paris, and signs in advertising light boxes along the boulevards of Santiago also contribute to this truly international anti-art marketing campaign during the years 1999 and 2000.

LUZ=LUZ (Spanish term for light equals light) is an enigmatic equation, perhaps referring to the relationship between art and life. For this Chilean-Canadian has developed a very complex visual method of undermining the contemporary art scene's trappings, in a larger effort to question how social values are entrenched. The interior displays at each venue include a series of light boxes with text and photographs featuring the artist standing in front of selection of cultural, commercial, and spiritual institutions. Phrases pasted above and below the images function as counter signifiers, questioning commonly held beliefs that are central to Western society. Art

does not equal art is undoubtedly the overriding slogan of his current show, and it has been combined with his own silhouette to create a fictitiously registered corporate logo. The official looking logo is emblazoned on the plethora of manufactured articles mentioned above, not to mention its communication over the internet and throughout this publication. It will also be rendered via a series of public actions on lawns, roadsides, and urban sites yet to be determined. Such a process represents the artist's attempt to flood an international public with an easily understood symbol of parody. Two massive banners on The Beaverbrook Art Gallery's façade with giant *arte=arte* trademarks are the most bombastic and architectonic evocation of his nihilistic message. Are the institutional settings and highly finished nature of *LUZ=LUZ* a contradiction of Claudio Rivera-Seguel's artistic ethics, or does this internationally co-ordinated effort reflect a new direction for him into the next millennium? ■

Vessna Perunovich, *So Many Lures, So Little Time*, 1999. Iron bed, red fabric, lures, fish hooks, sand. 22.86 x 10.16 x 15.24 cm. Photo courtesy of Third Gallery & Vessna Perunovich.

Vessna Perunovich's *Red E Scape* installation delineates the problematical territory between our desire for intimate contact and our fear of vulnerability. *So Many Lures, So Little Time*, the centrepiece in Perunovich's exhibition, simultaneously attracts and repels.

We want to come closer, to touch the metal bed-frame's weathered textures, but caution tells us to keep our distance. Barbed hooks and brightly-coloured fishing lures hang like a shimmering cloud overhead. Suspended below the fishing lures, just above the tensely-spiralled bedsprings, are red drop-lets; small sand-filled cloth bags the colour of blood.

So Many Lures, So Little Time gives substance to a human dilemma. When we open ourselves up to a lover or friend, we accept the possibility of being hurt. Yet, to fully explore our emotional capacities, we must acknowledge a paradox;

that physical violence can occur within the most tender sexual experience, and that psychological exploitation sometimes occurs among the best of friends.

A familiar object of our social landscape, Perunovich's double bed is a delicate wire structure that could be perceived as a romantic site for seduction and pleasure. Curving tracery at the head and foot appears like a line drawing, softening the rectangular geometry of the metal skeleton and questioning whether the bed is sturdy enough to support a body—let alone the rambunctious intercourse of two bodies.

For all its familiarity in domestic life, in Perunovich's installation the bed is a hazardous zone. Her bright hooks shiver suspended in the air. The red cloth bags hang heavily. They may be imitative of drops of blood but they also convey the weightiness of body bags. Every interpretation suggests the threat of wounding, of violation, of wracking pain. Inevitably, rape comes to mind.

So Many Lures, So Little Time

Vessna Perunovich *Red E Scape*

PAULA GUSTAFSON



is one of a series of works by Perunovich focussing on beds as locations of passion. *Splitting Up*, for example—exhibited in Toronto in 1998—featured an iron bed frame laced with long strips of red cloth instead of bed-springs. Inserted at an angle across the warped matrix, a metal crosscut saw held the strips in place, one between each of its sharp teeth.

Toronto curator Corinna Ghasnavi, writing about Perunovich's sculptures in the Fall/Winter 1998 issue of *Artichoke*, states that all of her work "lays bare the darkest consequence of human interactions—and the startling tenacity with which we pursue them anyway. She celebrates this as something heroic in the face of irrevocable damage."

While the desire to connect with another human is among our most basic urges, it is often a scary venture. We hope and dream, we agonize over the risks, then we go ahead and do it. The aftermath can be sweet or sour. Perunovich's *Long Last Kiss* sculpture is a poignant memento. Here, two fencing masks, installed at right angles to each other at a corner of the gallery, share a stream of shredded red fabric flowing from

their faces. (The stretchy knit fabric Perunovich favours is particularly appropriate in this piece since it "runs" as do tears.)

A more ambiguous aftermath is portrayed in the red cloth "pool" attached to the *Escape* sculpture's long wooden oar. The oar could be read as the thrust of penetration; the red "pool" as a shadow-memory of bruising. But perhaps more than bruised flesh is implied here. There's a sharp metal hand tool protruding from the far end of the flattened cloth sack—and the sack is not simply a cloth bag resembling a puddle. Perunovich has made it from red pantyhose.

The complexity of this piece is compounded by the irony of *Escape*'s title. In Perunovich's construction the oar and its baggage are inextricably joined. A facile reading might be that an oar unable to out-row or shake off its shadow must forever drag the consequences of its actions.

As an active verb, "escape" took on a more sinister meaning in a recent interview with Perunovich. The date was April 7, the 13th day of NATO bombing of her homeland of Yugoslavia. Although she and

her husband moved to Toronto ten years ago, Perunovich admitted she felt emotionally torn apart by the conflict. "My parents are in Belgrade, somewhere in shelters, waiting for death to be delivered to them," she said, worriedly adding that, although she had been able to contact them by telephone, there was nothing she or her husband could do to alleviate their plight.

"I grew up in Belgrade when it was an open, all-nationalities, Western-oriented city, and finished my master's [degree] there in 1987. I wanted to study costume design—I was always in love with fabric—but I didn't get accepted because my drawing was more art than fashion design. So I applied to the Academy of Fine Arts," Perunovich explained. Her decision to leave Yugoslavia came about not from any political motivations, but at the urging of a friend living in Canada. The choice proved to be serendipitous. "It was a good move, because I don't think I would have had a chance to work there," she said.

Perunovich's 1997 *Intimacy and Beyond* and her 1998 *Of Passion and Rage* exhibitions in Toronto established her creden-

tials as a proponent of feminist theories. The bed in *Intimacy and Beyond*, for instance, featured a mattress woven from transparent pantyhose into which she had inserted prickly, dried branches. Earlier this year, she exhibited *Silent Cries* at Hamilton Artists Inc. This work consisted of an upright front door onto whose paint-scarred surface Perunovich had fixed two trumpet-like fire truck horns. Spilling down in two long strands from the mouths of the elongated klaxons are her trademark weighted, red tear-drops.

While it is obvious that Perunovich explores the anxieties and consequences of intimacy from a feminist viewpoint, she emphasizes she is not purposefully focussing on victimization. She said her work is based on her own life experiences—and certainly on meeting the ebullient Perunovich the impression is that she unhesitatingly commits herself to friends and lovers.

Sadly, she notes, "when it comes to violence, we usually respond with violence. That's the easiest response, more violence and more misery." It's a theme that recurs in her sculptures and, unbidden, in our everyday lives. ■

Thérèse Chabot, global view of the two installations, 1999. Photo Courtesy of the artist.

Thérèse CHABOT

JOHN K. GRANDE

Far from the hustle and bustle of Montreal's gallery scene at her home in St-Jean Baptiste near St-Hilaire, Thérèse Chabot has been selecting, planting, and supervising the growth of a variety of flower and plant species: dahlias, delphiniums, roses, lavender, bunny tail, Chinese lanterns, sunflowers etc. She initiates their growth, and nature continues the process. Their colours, shapes, smells, eventually become the *materia media* that go into Chabot's garden installations. They fulfill a social need to integrate with nature so sadly lacking in a world of technobabble and image/object idolatry.