

**Garry Neill Kennedy
(Sporting Type)**

Cold City Gallery, Toronto
25 April-20 May 1992

Garry Neill Kennedy

S. L. Simpson Gallery, Toronto
7-30 May 1992

As Terry Eagleton, a British literary theorist, has written, "language has become the paradigm and obsession of 20th-century intellectuals [artists included]." *Sporting Types*, a group show featuring the works of Greg Curnoe, Diane Gagné, Ken Lum, and Garry Neill Kennedy, was about language: its various forms, particularly the colloquial and commercial, and the performative function in how we make sense of our everyday world. Kennedy's solo piece, *Uh-Huh*, was a witty and theatrical example of how informal language, inclusive of slang, has the power to determine meaning, subjectivity, and social relations; and suggests that language is not as opaque as we believe it to be.

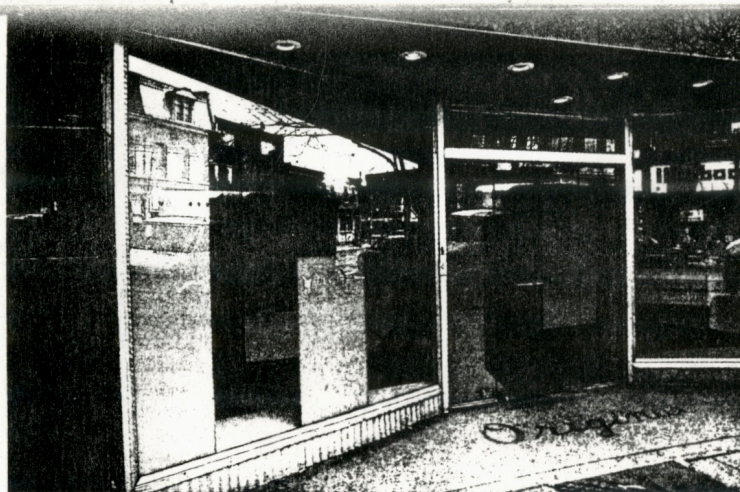
Uh-Huh was literally so visible that it becomes invisible. Larger-than-life letters of the vernacular word, painted through their negative space in turquoise blue, from ceiling to floor, enveloped the window and the gallery walls, symbiotically linked with the gallery vestibule. So ubiquitous were the letters that the traditional binary opposition of form and content was eradicated: form becoming content, content becoming form. Walking

nonchalantly through the gallery's entrance, perhaps unaware of what just happened – that he or she had just walked through the piece – a viewer, the consumer of meaning, became the consumed. Instantly, the joke was on him or her.

The site painting awakened the viewer from his or her trance-like state, from the hectic hustle and bustle of Queen Street. As with Bertolt Brecht's plays, the viewer was no longer the passive recipient of meaning. In being engulfed by the piece, both physically and mentally, the viewer's consciousness became energized. *Uh-Huh* subtly transformed consciousness from lifeless object to critical subject.

More in the politically active spirit of Dada, rather than the passivism of Pop Art, Kennedy delivered, as usual, a social critique laced with witty irony. Language, consciously and unconsciously, structures (as it did here), our behaviour, our experiences, and our attitudes, reminds Kennedy: language, in the Althusserian fashion, "interpellates" or "transforms the individuals into subjects". By placing the art object within the actuality of human life – its society, its politics – Kennedy exemplifies how it is that reality does not reflect language, how reality and the individual are produced by it, rather.

Kennedy contrasted the publicness of the idiomatic *Uh-Huh* with the privateness of the gallery's cultural space, only to have said publicness return with the viewer's involvement. Underlying this



Garry Neill Kennedy, *Uh-Huh* (installation detail), '92 site painting.

juxtaposition are further subtexts, such as the viewer's relationship to the art object: no longer does he or she stand before the artwork, offering a critique; rather, it is the artwork which now 'perceives' us. Not only is our gaze shattered in such reverse positioning, but the authority of our physical presence – our body, derivative of our knowledge and our senses – is also undermined.

At the Cold City Gallery, Kennedy's nine silkscreens depicted enlarged images taken from that periodical flagship of popular culture, *The New Yorker*. Referencing an earlier piece,

Seized/Seizures (Cold City, 1991), these works reflect scenes taken from behind the boss' desk in executive cartoons. Kennedy plays around with the forms that structure these scenes. In one of the pieces (all untitled), two generic individuals, situated in the center, are enclosed by thick, impermeable contours; in another, a million little dots form a repetitive pattern of V's; while in yet another, two individual pictures, composed of tiny dots, articulate a hieroglyphic letter. These works are all variables of an invariant mocking, through the use of distortion, of the real importance of the executive boss.

Regardless of variation in process or product, one of the aims of Kennedy's work is to deconstruct. As with S. Freud, who often referred to himself as an archaeologist, Kennedy's vocation is to unmask the concealed, to reveal the unrevealed. Analogous to Freud's theory of aesthetics, Kennedy's work also calls for a rereading because one could, as with Freud, vehemently reject his work. However, if read in the spirit of the piece, and the viewer's preconceived notions when consuming the text, a plurality of meanings is produced. With Kennedy, each art piece plays as a symptom of the larger (often sociopolitical) issue.

As Garry Kennedy's work continues to demonstrate, art, regardless of its seeming simplicity, can seldom be taken at face value. Art, as exemplified through the creatively colloquial *Uh-huh*, is too connected to our commonplace world and its experiences. Rather than confine his art to the centripetality of the dominant cultural elite, Kennedy ushers it into the world of the everyday, where it originated and where it remains connected.

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