

Sarah Beck
Ôde

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Number 59, Spring 2002

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9331ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Gustafson, P. (2002). Review of [Sarah Beck: *Ôde*]. *Espace Sculpture*, (59), 48–49.

SARAH BECK: *Öde*

the viewing or the participatory audience of the artwork?" In order for the monument to fulfill its purpose of becoming a media symbol, the silhouette of the sculpture would need to function as a logo. Another pressing factor was the necessity for community input. Focus groups of survivors made suggestions during consultations in which they discussed Irving's miniature clay models, and approved the final proposal. They decided that the figure needed to have a positive, uplifting gesture, to ensure that the viewer would not be overwhelmed by the pain in many of the images.

This decision is validated by the expression of relief that floods the face of a person who enters the studio for the first time. Reassured by the friendliness of the monument, people slowly move in and soon become absorbed by the stories and craft of the quilt squares. They then discover that many squares are surprisingly positive: most survivors chose to create messages of hope. They called up scores of symbols to express their healing as well as their struggle. Small children scale cliffs and ropes. Dragons and wolves come to the rescue; eagles battle snakes. Seeds sprout, embryos grow, caterpillars transform, chains are broken. Angels abound.

Even with an apparent societal consensus on the importance of the issue of child abuse, and after years of effort have created a monument that is successful without being threatening or obscene, acquiring funding and finding a site have been problematic. Public policy has fallen behind changing ideas about the nature of public art. Selection processes for public sites in Toronto fail to recognize the growing field of community art. They contain no room for artist-generated works, and a community's role is limited to making a request. In the end, the Toronto Maple Leafs and the principals of the Air Canada Centre made the courageous step of offering their location as a permanent home. Irving is now trying to arrange a cross-country tour of the completed bronze figure, while it awaits preparation of its site.

The field of community art has given Irving a definition within which his practice can be recognized, but the fit is not always comfortable. Its definitions encourage practitioners to func-

tion more as facilitators and community organizers than as creators in their projects. There are pitfalls to this admirable process, for community artists often have no more training in organizational or therapeutic work than the groups they work with have in making art. The results are often ephemeral, something that would have been inappropriate for child abuse survivors. Irving points out that abused children are all-too-accustomed to seeing their efforts destroyed.

As both a trained psychotherapist and a working sculptor, Michael Irving has learned the necessity of drawing a clear line between the two functions. As an artist he resists the idea of not being an active creative participant in a project whose realization has required his unique blend of life experience, clinical and sculptural skills, and his daily ministrations over a period of years. As an organizer, he takes seriously his obligation to keep his promises and ensure the project's completion.

Both a clinician and a social activist artist, Irving intends this monument to be not only a symbolic gesture, but a real tool for change: "I think that you help victims not to become perpetrators, and there's a need to help victims to not be so inward and so wounded . . . And then society itself is wounded from hearing and seeing these stories and not having a chance to process them. That's called vicarious trauma. One way that works in psychological terms is called projective identification. That means there's something inside you that's hard to manage and to conceptualize: it's hard to work with and talk about. So you put it into something outside yourself: you put it into a story, or a myth; you can put it into an artwork."

As for the importance of this social recovery to society, I give the last word to Marque Brill: "If we can so deliberately ignore the abuse of children, who are the starting point of the formation of who we are as a society, then it is hard for me to imagine us, as a society, addressing the many other abuses I'm aware of." ←

Reaching Out:
The Survivor Monument Project
In progress, 1993-
Toronto, Ontario

Less than ten days after Toronto artist Sarah Beck disassembled *Öde*, the irony implicit in her multi-media installation at Third Avenue Gallery became the reality of September 11, 2001. The centrepiece of *Öde* was a low-cost, environmentally-friendly, easily wiped-clean, full-size replica of a military tank.

Yet in spite of its immense volume, Beck's sculpture was a benign presence, merely filling the Vancouver gallery wall to wall, floor to ceiling, like a big toy some boy-giant might have left behind in the sandbox.

In the aftermath of 9/11, as previously unthinkable phrases such as "weaponized biological agents" and "homeland security" became the standard lingo of America's New War on terrorism (another new phrase), the amiable intention of *Öde* seemed less an artful parody of childish consumerist desires than a portent of a future suddenly arrived.

Conceptually, *Öde* is a pseudo-retail enterprise mimicking mass-marketing tactics that lull buyers into believing that consumer products will make their lives happier. Using the IKEA model of print and electronic merchandising to supplement retail sales, Beck produced hundreds of copies of a 32-page full-colour catalogue outlining the *Öde* vision; "a better everyday life through global militarization." Filled with cheery photographs of smiling children and

carefree young adults (tumbling on hay bales, blowing soap bubbles, fondling a kitten), the catalogue text confides that "most of the time well designed weapons are created for a small part of the population — the few who can afford them. From the beginning, *Öde* has taken a different path. We have decided to side with the many. That means responding to the armament needs of people throughout the world. . . people who want to improve their situation and create a better everyday life."

Proclaiming that "*Öde* cares!" the tongue-in-cheek publication shows white, middle-class families busily assembling their own military equipment using a step-by-step instruction guide and an Allen key. "It's so simple, one tool is all you'll need. . . we've thought of everything so you can focus on your dreams."

The dream in this instance is owning a 30-foot long, authentically modelled 1997 American Rooikot 105 armoured tank, identical to those used by South African military forces. The fact that it is constructed entirely of white plastic-coated particle board — and is inoperable as a weapon — is glossed over with seductive marketing ploys emphasizing the tank's contemporary styling, optional finishes, and the availability of co-ordinating accessories. Apparently, to paraphrase David Lee Roth, battle-readiness isn't dependent on "whether you win or lose, but how good you look."

The *Öde* website perpetuates the notion that security can be

SARAH BECK, *Öde*, 2001. Tank in driveway of home belonging to Beck's parents (Saskatchewan). Photo: courtesy of the artist.



ISABELLE LAVERDIÈRE. La consommation : une question d'identité ?

bought online in do-it-yourself kits. In addition to showroom views of Beck's installation, *www.shopode.com* presents soothing excerpts from the catalogue — "We help you bring your life under control ... at your fingertips are two tonnes of material that will withstand any rough terrain" — and a 30-second music video entitled *Freedom*, which features a girl dancing along a beach, flying a kite that soars into the sky. Viewing these images against the backdrop of news reportage of terrorist attacks, it's impossible not to contrast their emotional reassurances to the vortex of hysteria that has swept across North America.

Unlike other parts of the world — Chile, Vietnam, Nicaragua, the Sudan, Guatemala, Serbia, Chaipas, to name just a few — where personal and national freedoms have been erased at the point of a gun, our citizenry has generally never felt the need to acquire personal arsenals (the American Rifle Association notwithstanding). Yet, in the new context of world terrorism, *Ôde's* goal of aiding "any resistance movement in its effort to compete globally with easily accessible, affordable, technologically advanced equipment," doesn't translate as Gen-X irony anymore; rather, it sounds the alarm of paranoia.

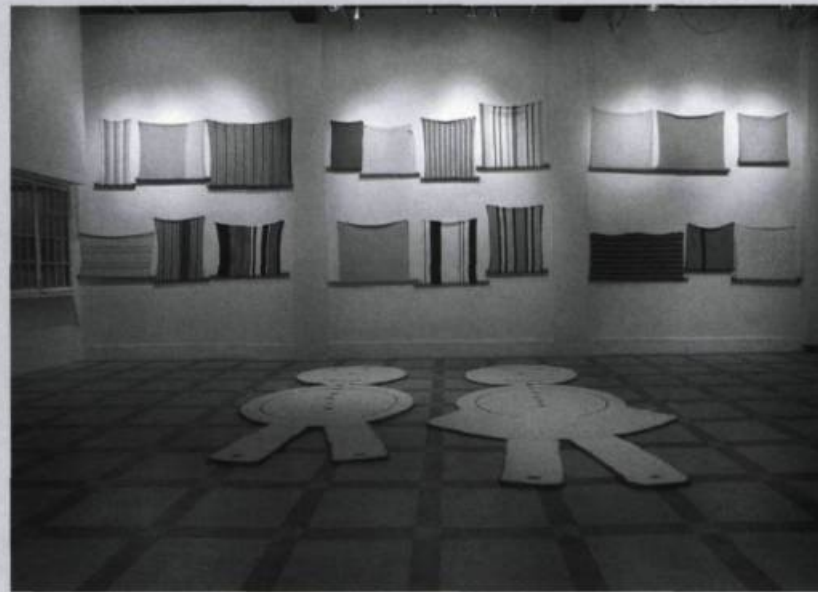
The art world is not immune to international events and frequently responds by showing concern for social issues. Yet, art as an activity has little or no immediate effect in alleviating suffering or injustice. Instead, art's imagery seeps imperceptibly into the collective psyche, slowly altering attitudes and mores. While *Ôde's* focus is not a commentary on armed conflict — like a quick-dissolving pill promising instant relief for life's ills, Beck's marketing ploy proposes only a palliative for anxiety —, it nevertheless puts a spotlight on the absurdity of perceiving security as a commodity. ←

Sarah Beck: *Ôde*
Third Avenue Gallery, Vancouver
August 2-31, 2001

Active depuis août dernier et située en plein cœur de la basse-ville de Québec, la nouvelle galerie Rouge s'affirme comme un lieu prometteur de diffusion privée de l'art actuel québécois. C'est dans l'une des trois salles d'exposition qu'est installée la plus récente production d'Isabelle Laverdière, dont l'ensemble du dispositif hétérogène, ouvert et tout à fait cohérent, se manifeste comme un moment charnière duquel surgit la vivacité d'un questionnement sur l'interpénétration des domaines socio-politiques de la construction de l'intimité domestique, ici, l'espace référentiel, protégé et intérieur du logis, celui de l'environnement extérieur immédiat du *home* : la cour, et enfin celui de la consommation, soit la surface suggérée du supermarché ou du libre-service dont les marchandises offertes envahissent toujours déjà l'aménagement de ces espaces privés.

Ce faisant, la diversité des matériaux et procédés, ainsi que des objets que l'artiste sélectionne ou conçoit, réalise et met en scène, comme, entre autres, l'utilisation récurrente de tissus produits en industrie, l'accrochage opéré sous le mode de l'étalage commercial et la construction d'un caddie aux dimensions démesurées — le caddie n'est-il pas le symbole par excellence de la consommation déchaînée et de l'illusion du choix ? —, témoignent de ce rapport identitaire, et par conséquent socialement *distinctif*, qui lie étroitement l'agent social à l'univers de la consommation.

Abordé dans cette perspective qui, j'en conviens, ne saurait être la seule avenue d'interprétation, ce corpus me paraît s'inscrire



d'emblée du côté des réflexions de l'heure concernant la construction de l'identité, développées tant du côté des arts visuels que de celui des études visuelles, lesquelles interrogent cette culture des images et des objets qui envahit sournoisement la formation du soi qui, plus que jamais, est la nôtre. Dit autrement, ce que semble nous proposer la visite de cette configuration composite que constitue *M.INTIMITÉ*, c'est que la construction du soi, et conséquemment du chez-soi, ici et maintenant, dans cet Occident mondialisé et chaotique, est traversée par le rituel illusoire, alléchant et exutoire de la consommation, auquel nul n'échappe. Partant de là, les objets/design de Laverdière, réunis ici sous les modes de visualisation que sont le dessin, la sculpture et le ready-made, remettent en question la croyance fautive que nous sommes ce que nous consommons et que, par la consommation, nous révélons aux autres notre différence.

Voyons donc comment s'énonce, dans cette production visuelle, ce rapport à l'identité se jouant entre le territoire de l'intime, celui du *home sweet home* et l'espace économique de la consommation ou du *great supermarket* qui influe sur notre

ISABELLE LAVERDIÈRE, *M.INTIMITÉ*, 2001.
Au mur : *Shades et Shit* ; au sol : *Pas pareil*
(*Pat et Tique*). Photo : I. Laverdière.

façon mensongère de se dire au monde, en mettant l'accent sur le gonflement des apparences.

Organisées frontalement, en deux rangées, sur le mode de la superposition et de la juxtaposition, dix-neuf pièces de tissus extensibles, tendues au mur à la façon d'un *display* — comme on dit dans le vocabulaire de la mise en marché — et couplées en leur extrémité inférieure à des tubes de carton cylindriques, imposent leur présence rythmée par de multiples rayures de couleur imprimées à l'horizontale et à la verticale. Dans ce contexte, les objets arbitraires structurés en ready-made changent de statut, de même que la récupération du procédé commercial de monstration qui les définit, nouvellement, sur le plan sémantique, contribue à leur dimension maintenant polysémique. Il ne s'agit plus de simples pièces de tissu combinées à des tubes de carton, mais plutôt d'objets ayant perdu, par l'opération d'un détournement stratégique, leur fonctionnalité propre et servant l'intentionnalité discursive de l'artiste. En ceci, ces objets-textiles énigmatiques, jouant entre