

Peace of Mind
Contemporary Art Forum, Kitchener and Area

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IVAN JURAKIC

Situated in downtown Kitchener, the Contemporary Art Forum, Kitchener and Area, or CAFKA for short, is an example of the positive synergy that can occur when artists are granted access to public spaces and supported by their municipality. CAFKA was launched in 2000 as an ambitious attempt to site contemporary art in the troubled downtown core, using the centralized location of Kitchener City Hall as a focus. From the beginning, CAFKA set out to exhibit artists from across the region side-by-side with visiting artists from overseas. This year brought to fruition this potent mix of local and international interests in a diverse program that touched upon some of the strengths and weaknesses inherent to this kind of event.

"Peace of Mind," was the theme chosen as a conceptual guideline for CAFKA.04, an allusion — and possibly even a corrective — to our perceptions in a post-9/11 world. What struck me were the enormous complexities this theme suggested, a subject fraught with so much potential anxiety that it did little to promote the sense of harmony suggested by the title. Ultimately, the project was coloured by this sense of uneasiness, with many of the artists exhibiting an instinctive tendency toward apprehension, but there were some rays of hope.

The project was predicated upon twenty-two site-responsive installations and performances, occupying the interior and exterior premises of Kitchener City Hall during the week of September 18-26. Ranging in content and medium from sculptural interventions to interactive installations and artist actions, the works were best approached as signposts on a journey through the radial hallways and chambers of City Hall. I enjoyed drifting throughout the site discovering the artworks, while sharing the space with visitors, local business people, and a bemused security staff.

What I found particularly relevant was the leap of faith required when confronting these complex and often

difficult artworks in the context of a venue designed for public transactions of a more bureaucratic bent. Many of the artists took a calculated risk placing their works in this context, where breakdown or damage often ensued from perhaps a little too much public interaction. Nonetheless, a number of outstanding projects left a lingering impression.

Corwyn Lund, Janis Demkiw and Duncan McDonald collaborated on *Music Box Revolving Door*, a subtle intervention encountered while entering the building. By discretely installing a series of music box mechanisms into the revolving doors at the entrance to City Hall, the artists activated a ubiquitous non-space, and transformed its utilitarian function with the chime of pedestrian-generated music. Visitors to the building were at once reminded of their physical passage from outdoors to indoors, and of pleasant childhood memories associated with playing in revolving doors.

Edmund Law situated *All Apologies* as a droll act of contrition. Having appropriated eleven pieces of granite from the construction site at City Hall several years previous, the artist returned this same masonry to its site of origin in the form of a stereo stand, which apparently served him well during the interim. Casually sited on the second floor, a formal letter of apology to the Mayor of Kitchener and a self-conscious recording of apologies playing on a loop turned the stereo stand into a minor shrine to individual failure and folly.

David Bouchard presented *The Dandelion Field*, an interactive video installation where the viewer's participation activated a computer-generated image of a field. As one walked, ran, or jumped on a bed of AstroTurf, the projected green space was subsumed by concrete towers rising rapidly out of the ground. When the towers subsequently reached their peak, they in turn transformed into dandelions. The ingeniousness of the piece illustrated our direct impact upon the natural environment. Strictly speaking, dandelions are no more indigenous to our environment than office towers and, set in the context of a municipal building where developers are regularly courted, this irony was not lost.



Zivko Grozdanic confronted visitors with *Big Mirror*, an anvil carefully propped between two thick sheets of glass set upon a solid steel table. The ominous tableaux suggested imminent collapse, an elegant and potent visual metaphor for the fragility of peace and the seeming inevitability of war and conflict. It was a powerful reminder of the tentative balancing act that notions of peace and stability represent to the many millions in this world who do not have the luxury to take either for granted.

By contrast, Pavel Acosta and Yuneikys Villalonga presented *Amusement*, a collaborative installation and performance which featured the most inviting of gestures. Occupying the wading pool in the forecourt of City Hall, the artists filled the shallow waters of the pool with dozens of white plastic reclining chairs. Visitors were invited to take their shoes off, wade into the water and relax on the recliners as an urban alternative to a day at the

beach. The accidental audience was then engaged by the artists, who humbly served drinking water and provided towels to dry wet feet.

The simplicity and generosity of this gesture did not go unappreciated. As I sat talking with a colleague, feet dangling in the cool waters, children frolicked, people wandered barefoot on concrete, and a pair of locals took full advantage of the unseasonably warm weather to suntan. Here the democratizing ideals of CAFKA were perhaps most fully realized as the artists reclaimed this ubiquitous municipal plaza and transformed it into a temporary urban oasis for the enjoyment and contemplation of the people. ←

Ivan JURAKIC is a visual artist, curator and writer based in Hamilton, Ontario. He is the new curator at Cambridge Galleries in Cambridge, Ontario.

Contemporary Art Forum, Kitchener and Area
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Edmund LAW,
All Apologies, 2004.
Installation. Photo:
Dean Palmer.

Pavel ACOSTA &
Yuneikys VILLALONGA,
Amusement, 2004.
Installation/performance. Photo: Dean Palmer.