

## ***There and Gone / Istnienie Ulotne: Walter May, Laura Vickerson and Peter von Tiesenhausen***

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[See table of contents](#)

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# There and Gone / Istnienie Ulotne: Walter MAY, Laura VICKERSON and Peter von TIESENHAUSEN

Mireille PERRON

*There and Gone / Istnienie Ulotne* was organized and curated by Bozena Wisniewska from Canada with co-curator Klementyna Bochenska from Poland. The two versions of the exhibition took place respectively at Galeria Klimy located in an aged factory complex in Warsaw, and the Nickle Arts Museum located on the University of Calgary campus. All three artists presented here – Walter May, Laura Vickerson, and Peter von Tiesenhausen – live and work in Alberta. They have all exhibited widely, nationally and internationally, but it was the first time for them to exhibit together and in Poland.

It is a difficult task to integrate elements of another culture into one's own practice in order to engage in a meaningful dialogue with a new audience. All three artists have succeeded in this difficult task under the guidance of their curators. Friendship and trust were one mark of the curatorial enterprise that made this event/dialogue possible.

The works of May, Vickerson,

and von Tiesenhausen pay particular attention to their surroundings: geographical, physical, and political. The artists are all well versed in the critical operations that have marked "sculpture in the expanded field." They also share an aesthetic of the trace, where found objects and recycled materials form their ephemeral sculptures and installations. The trace aesthetic provokes a reflection on the display of objects while simultaneously stimulating the ability to recall the past. Favoured an affinity for a materiality that is fleeting, precarious, and transient, May, Vickerson and von Tiesenhausen conceive of the gallery as a space for intervention.

The artists have a sustained engagement with representations of nature, something that Poles have said they can readily identify as Canadian.<sup>1</sup> Often a cliché of "Canadian Identity," representations of nature exploited non critically only stand as mere fetishized artistic commodities. It is liberating to witness that recent curatorial enterprises have favoured intriguing solutions over reiterations. Another example is *CAMP-sites*, curated by Melanie Townsend and presented around the same time at the Walter Phillips Gallery of the Banff Centre.<sup>2</sup> I posit that *There*

and *Gone / Istnienie Ulotne* shares a similar conceptual universe by investigating notions of temporality, displacement, shelter, consumption, and survival.

In the introduction to the exhibition's catalogue, Bozena Wisniewska comments:

There and Gone is a remarkable metaphor for an art installation and its temporality: the installation is there for a moment, it embraces or contradicts the space where it is presented, it makes the space arresting and floating for a brief moment, and then, its physicality vanishes, to be replaced by memories.<sup>3</sup>

Laura Vickerson's contribution does indeed "make the space arresting and floating." *White Tent* and the *Small Boxes Architecture* series are in continuation with previous works that commented on our society of consumption. In *White Tent*, Vickerson presents a pristine white replica of a standard camping tent, usually a dark forest green. On the tent's semi-transparent screens, the artist has meticulously sewn recycled cut-out paper into ornaments of flowers and leaves. One can recognize fragments of various flyers and letters: Air Canada, Chinese take-out, the Canada Council, and Emergency Blue pages, to name only a few. It is as if society's garbage, which one theo-

retically escapes while on a camping trip, had been blown into delicate pieces that flew and stuck to the windows of the displaced white tent. A white canopy is suspended over the tent as if it were also caught in the wind. This very striking work evokes a sense of displacement where nature and civilization seem frozen in time, if only to reflect on one another for a brief moment. Wisniewska notes that Polish viewers perceived the pristine space in contrast with the polluted state of their post-communism country.<sup>4</sup>

On the surrounding walls of the gallery, playing admirably well with scale, Vickerson's *Small Boxes Architecture* series also comments on displacement. Made with recycled paper or tin boxes, many found in the flea market in Warsaw, the small constructions become precious little objects, small-scale architectural models that wish to be desired again. They stand in strong contrast with their origins as society's rejects.

Walter May also roamed Warsaw's flea market searching for the elusive stag and other found objects. Echoing many of his previous works, May plays with the feeling of precarious imbalance; chairs are turned upside down and held by high tripods. In *A Disturbing Construc-*

Walter MAY, Laura VICKERSON and Peter von TIESENHAUSEN, *There and Gone / Istnienie Ulotne*, 2005. Detail. Galeria Klimy, Warsaw / Nickle Arts Museum, Calgary.





## Kirsten ABRAHAMSON: *Diary of a River*

Virginia EICHHORN

tion, adding to the sense of the uncanny, the chair/tripod couple is in dialogue with a small brass stag, a propane gas tank, and a video screen presenting mesmerizing images of flames from a campfire. The stag is pinned between the chair and the tripod. The fire becomes a metaphor for the sculptures themselves, precariously build, tended with care, fascinating and existing only for a brief moment in time. Sixty documentary photographs of extinguished campfires surround the sculpture.

In *Vaudeville*, as in *chanson du Vau de Vire* (song of the Valley of Vire in Normandy), which became a genre associated with satirical or topical songs sung on a stage, May directs his objects to perform another theatrical scene imbued with suspense and drama. The couple chair/tripod is propped high up—in Warsaw the tripod rested on a brick ledge that was part of the gallery wall while in Calgary it rests on gas tanks that echo the propane tank. They act as Damocles' sword, hanging over the scene like a constant threat. On the floor, an open umbrella holds in its fold another small brass stag. The stag is on his back in full extension and rest on a bed of charcoal.

Peter von Tiesenhausen's practice partakes of his environment. His work includes sculptural objects, land art, drawing, and paintings. Fire is a constant element/process that one finds throughout his work. He has burned large figures sculpted out of wood and drawn with burnt wood. In *Testament to Warsaw*, he poignantly engraved thousands of figures on narrow strips of charred wood. Small figures are scratched through a white wash to reveal the burned surface, as if they were scars in the wood. The artist worked in a public place, a parking lot behind the gallery. Rather than communicate verbally with passerbys, he decided to exchange with them visually by translating the physical presence of his surroundings into a visual script. Each figure becomes a visual translation offered as an homage to the people of Warsaw, in honour of their survival and perseverance through oppression. Von Tiesenhausen's allusion to the fragility

and tension inherent in negotiating a space, is also evident in *Acts of Resistance*. The artist has constructed a suspended bridge that crosses the width of the gallery space. In echo to *Testament to Warsaw*, *Acts of Resistance* is similarly made up of charred planks of wood marked with a multitude of small figures. Wisniewska witnessed the engagement of the Polish audience when confronted with their familiar and tragic history being recounted by a foreign artist.<sup>5</sup>

The diffusion of Canadian (not to mention Albertan) works abroad is always a time-consuming and complex affair. The warm reception by the Polish audience, as attested by the positive review of Lidia Bruszezewska, editor at *Spotkania z Zabytkami*, and the comments collected by the artists, abroad and back home, confirm the importance of these cross cultural exchanges.<sup>6</sup> ←

*There and Gone / Istnienie Ulotne*  
Galeria Klimy, Warsaw,  
June 22 – July 13, 2005  
Nickle Arts Museum, Calgary  
September 9 – November 20, 2005

Mireille PERRON is an artist, a writer on art and culture, and an educator. Since 1982, her installations have appeared in solo and group exhibitions in Canada, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy. Her work explores the connections between gender, culture, visual arts, science, and medicine. She has also written and published numerous essays and reviews in various anthologies, magazines and exhibition catalogues. Mireille Perron lives and works in Calgary, Alberta, where she teaches at the Alberta College of Art and Design.

#### NOTES

1. Conversation with Walter May, October, 2005.
2. Campsites curated by Melanie Townsend and presented around the same time at the Walter Phillips Gallery of the Banff Centre. URL: [http://www.banffcentre.ca/media\\_room/media\\_releases/2005/0707\\_campsites.htm](http://www.banffcentre.ca/media_room/media_releases/2005/0707_campsites.htm)
3. *There and Gone/ Istnienie Ulotne*, 2005, exhibition catalogue, Bozena Wisniewska.
4. Conversation with Wisniewska, November 2, 2005.
5. *Op. Cit.*
6. To see more images from these artists: Laura Vickerson: [www.ccca.ca](http://www.ccca.ca); Peter von Tiesenhausen: [www.tiesenhausen.net](http://www.tiesenhausen.net)

Deep within the Pharaoh's pyramid, sits a small room. It is virtually inaccessible save for a complicated series of small, hidden tunnels leading from the room to the topmost point of the pyramid. When the tunnels are open they allow the sun's light to penetrate through, illuminating the small room, positioned like the heart of the structure.

chamber. But upon further reflection, found it quite fitting. If one considers the location of the Queen's Chamber, and the purpose of the King's sculpture within it, the room becomes an evocation of undying love and protection—a testament to the power of emotion that will never die.

Kirsten Abrahamson's *Diary of a River* represents a four-year journey in the artist's life. It was a journey where, she admits, she



The room is known as the Queen's Chamber. Oddly, it does not contain the Queen's sarcophagus or reliquary or statue. Instead, the only thing within, the item that is illuminated and warmed by the sun's rays, is a sculpture of the King. This sculpture is thought to represent his Eternal body, the one to which his spirit can return to when his mortal remains no longer exist.

I thought it curious that the room would be called the Queen's, rather than the King's or the Pharaoh's

Kirsten ABRAHAMSON, *Diary of a River*, 2005. Detail. Ceramic and mixed media. 3.04 x 6.09 x 1.98 m. Photo: Garry Roll.

didn't know what was going to come "down the river" when she began the work—and she could never have expected what happened either. Life, sometimes—often times—, is like that. And the fact that Abrahamson, rather than withdrawing or ceasing to produce work, let her work react to the events she was experiencing,