“The Ambiguities”: Toronto’s Pictures Generation by Adam Lauder

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We wanted to point out the function of ambiguity in our work, the way in which ambiguity “flips the meaning in and out of focus,” thus preventing the successful deciphering of the text (both visual and written) except on multiple levels.

—General Idea

BAD BOYS AND “THEORETICAL GIRLS”[1]

The early 1980s were a time when a war of images played across battle lines defined by identity and representation. Artists and critics fiercely debated—often in the turgid jargon of French Theory—the return of the image following more than a decade of militant dematerialization. In some ways, this crisis was sparked by artists’ new flirtation with the mainstream[2]—particularly the aesthetics of movies and TV—following conceptualism’s prohibitions on visual pleasure. At bottom, the controversy swirled around this question: were the “pictures” of this generation to reflect a new spirit of critique, or, was this merely a regressive “return of painting” and of all the problematic essentialisms that the medium had come to signify for the Generation of ’68? Through its publication of Philip Monk’s *Struggles with the Image* (YYZBOOKS, 1988, the artist-run centre’s first monograph), and its earlier hosting of the critic-curator’s seminal exhibition *Subjects in Pictures* (1984), YYZ was at the eye of this storm as it broke in Toronto.

But the Toronto art scene’s notorious resistance to its own historicization[3] has predictably meant that even in the wake of renewed interest in this period sparked by the 2009 Met blockbuster exhibition, *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984*, the corresponding chapter in Canadian cultural history remains, for now at least, “gossip remembered.”[4] Not that I want to perpetuate the myth that “there is no history” of contemporary art in Toronto.[5] Rae Johnson and Herb Tookey’s 2011 MOCCA exhibition, *This is Paradise*, was compelling proof that “Toronto’s sociality”[6] can indeed serve as an effective device for mapping the city’s contrasting networks of practice. But the history that I want to propose here is different.

My approach comes closest to Stan Douglas' 1991 account of "the Toronto Avant-Garde"[7] as located in traditions of parody, masquerade, and pastiche. Like Douglas, I cannot claim to be a "witness" to the events on which I report. But hopefully this very distance will prove productive in moving the discussion beyond the anecdotal and amnesiac. No doubt the first objection to the project announced by the title of this essay will be to the effect that, *there never was a Canadian Pictures Generation.* Yet recent international projects have demonstrated the utility of the "Pictures" moniker as an umbrella for a wider range of artists than those originally presented by the 1977 exhibition at Artists Space in New York curated by Douglas Crimp. In fact, Toronto-based artists such as General Idea represent an overlooked influence on the emergence of American Pictures artists through their geographical proximity to one of the crucibles of the movement: Buffalo's Hallwalls.[8] Certainly, the unapologetic humour and sensuality of General Idea's pop-cultural appropriations must have been a potent model for younger artists questioning the hermetic "factography" of Conceptual Art across the border.

In this essay, I want to explore how this period's "struggles with the image" can be understood today in terms of a gradual coming to terms with the fundamental ambiguity of pictures. Although American commentators addressed this theme as early as 1977[9], it continues to elude critical attention in this country. In the Toronto context, the stakes of reckoning with the ambivalence of pictures are nowhere more stark than in the early writings of Philip Monk. Revisiting Monk's texts in light of Douglas Eklund's recognition of the perpetual evasiveness of the mass-mediated imagery mined by the Pictures Generation as well as Helen Molesworth's destabilization of conventional binaries between neo-conceptual and neo-expressionist strands of the period is to confront a resonance between the "local" and "elsewhere" that is categorically disavowed by Monk.[10] In retrospect Monk's early writings can be recognized as reacting to the cultural imperialism of American mass media, whose appropriation by New York artists troubled the representational politics proposed by the Canadian critic-curator. In some sense then, this article also constitutes a first attempt at tracing the evolution of Monk's ideas, a project proposed by artist Luis Jacob in a review of the critic-curator's more recent exhibition and text on General Idea—which, it must be underlined from the outset, present a near complete reversal of Monk's earlier arguments revisited here.[11]

RELAYS

It will no doubt strike many as perverse to pursue a reading of these themes through the intertext of Herman Melville's dizzying work of allegory, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852). But as American critic Craig Owens was the first to recognize[12], allegory was one of the central strategies adopted by the Pictures Generation. Yet this allegorical impulse is conspicuously absent from Monk's

linguistically motivated writings of the period (though its deployment here constitutes something of a tribute to the subsequent ”fictional” turn in the Toronto critic-curator’s projects). The visual orientation and American pedigree of Melville’s novel[13] also provide much-needed ballast to Monk’s defensive regionalism and overreliance on language games to address the politics of subjects in pictures.

If, as exhibition maker Jens Hoffmann proposes, Melville’s *Moby-Dick* is a story about “metaphysical uncertainty,”[14] the ambiguities mined by *Pierre* speak instead to the indeterminacy of language, vision and gender. Its maddeningly convoluted allegory inspired the unforgettable *New York Day Book* headline, “HERMAN MELVILLE CRAZY” (September 8, 1852). The novel’s narrative of incest and death hinges on a sequence of misrecognitions sparked by a series of family portraits: the first, a respectable “parlour” portrait of the deceased father of *Pierre’s* eponymous protagonist; the second, a portrait of the same, but painted, according to an aunt, surreptitiously in the aftermath of a pre-marital dalliance with a foreign woman. Pierre’s obstinate pursuit of a fleeting resemblance between the face in these paternal portraits and that of a mysterious young woman, Isabel, whom he presumes to be a long-lost sister, leads to the pair’s mutual expulsion from the family home in edenic Saddle Meadows to the squalid bohemia of New York. The incestuous love triangle that develops when the couple is joined there by Pierre’s jilted fiancée, Lucy, slowly unravels as his efforts to establish himself as a professional writer end in failure. The late discovery of an anonymous portrait resembling Pierre’s father at an exhibition of European paintings shatters any lingering illusion of genealogical or representational certainty sustaining the trio, which then lunges toward self-annihilation.

The shift in Monk’s writing away from a politically charged theory of spectatorship grounded in contingent “speech acts” toward an engagement with the image as a vehicle of ideology mirrored the increasingly representational orientation of younger Toronto artists in the early 1980s. This sea change was reflected in the critic-curator’s catalogue essays for his exhibitions *Language and Representation* (A Space, 1982) and *Subjects in Pictures* (YYZ, 1984). I want to appropriate Pierre’s frustrated “quest for truth” as a model for making sense of Monk’s puzzling search for the “real” in his reading of Toronto artists’ strategies of “reference”[15] in these years. “I thought of reference,” writes Monk in an early essay on Ian Carr-Harris, “as the possibility of a vehicle, a relay or tie to the real.”[16] While Monk’s aim is transparency, upon closer scrutiny his relay comes to resemble the “falsifying telegraphs” of the gaze in *Pierre*.[17]

Alberto Gabriele has recently described *Pierre* as embodying an “aesthetics of fragmentation” that reflects the disintegrating effects of industrial modernity. By way of exploring the novel’s vertiginous doublings and multiple perspectives, Gabriele introduces the figure of the thaumatrope: a nineteenth-century children’s toy which consists of a revolving disk painted with unrelated imagery on its two

sides that produce strange juxtapositions—and allegorical meanings—when set in motion. Gabriele compares the false oppositions unleashed by the thaumatrope and other pre-cinematic technologies to Melville's structuring of *Pierre* according to a logic of "provisional analogies" that remain suspended in a state of perpetual metamorphosis.

Monk's writings of the early 1980s communicate an allied desire to extract an elusive referent—"local and real"—from a recalcitrant image. "[I]s there some art that deals with issues of the real," queries a palpably disillusioned Monk in his contested "Axes of Difference" essay, a text whose thrust runs stubbornly counter to the opacity of the image excavated simultaneously by New York critics such as Craig Owens.[18] The artist who best exemplifies the "social relations of the image" theorized by Monk in this period is painter Joanne Tod.

JOANNE TOD: DISPLACEMENT AND CONTRADICTION

Tod's paintings occupy a pivotal place in Monk's early discourse on representation. The artist's celebrated pair of self-portraits, *Self Portrait* (1982) and *Self Portrait as Prostitute* (1983), not only expose historical forms of domination as the submerged referent of mass mediated images of femininity ("woman as object, woman in her domestic place"), they also extend Monk's prior discourse on spectatorship as a politics of "speech acts" by engaging issues of identity through the always contingent machinery of identification.[19] "We find an identification between the representation of women and the social function of painting," states Monk, "both of which cohere in the artist."[20] But the stable identity attributed by the critic-curator belies the subtle "displacement" later noted by Bruce Grenville, effected by the painter's uncanny substitution of the "'false' image" of a 1940s advertisement for her own likeness.[21] The distancing effect observed by Grenville is further amplified by the sheer doubleness of Tod's pendant self-portraits.

The artist's quotation of the earlier self-portrait in *Self Portrait as Prostitute* sets in motion a series of redundancies that disrupt the patriarchal codes of representation. Tod's harnessing of the double to undo the unitary gaze of traditional mimesis invites analogies with the fraught optics of *Pierre* as an allied troubling of gender and representation: "The doubling of the portrait in *Pierre* hinders any painterly synthesis of a male persona," observes Gabriele.[22] It is precisely this loss of reference that Monk's discourse must contain in order to salvage any claim on the "real." But even Monk cannot ignore the destabilizing "contradictions" of Tod's subsequent work of self-portraiture, the disquieting diptych *Identification/Defacement* (1983). Here the painter's name literally obliterates the face of a woman of colour depicted in the act of modelling different bridal costumes. While this violent gesture may imply a critique of the colonizing

gaze as Monk proposes, it also draws attention to the fundamental instability underlying all processes of identification, thereby doing violence to the very schema that the critic-curator mobilizes in the name of buttressing the "real." The violent assault on representation and patriarchy operative in all three of Tod's exercises in self-portraiture more closely approximates Pierre's motives for incinerating his parental portrait as a symbolic "killing of the father."

SHIRLEY WIITASALO: TWINNING AND TRANSFORMATION

Where Monk concedes a degree of contradiction in his analysis of Tod's more violent doublings, the "wild redundancy" of Shirley Wiitasalo's paintings is frankly deceptive.[23] He is nevertheless intent on enlisting the painter in his critical project. But the artist's work of the early 1980s unleashes a repetitive "twinning" of imagery within a single frame that refuses any stable circuit with the real.[24] Initially, paintings like *Interview* (1981) deploy the trope of the frame-within-a-frame. If at first sight this mirroring of the painting's edge by an interior border recalls Tod's strategy of self-quotation in *Self-Portrait as Prostitute*, Wiitasalo's purloined "pictures" of this period always reflect the stolen illumination of other media—usually television. Monk wants to read Wiitasalo's hybrid imagery as a form of resistant reception, but in hindsight the painter's cross-media aesthetic more closely approximates the "intermedia sensibility"[25] of New York Pictures artists such as Jack Goldstein, Robert Longo and Cindy Sherman, whose violation of modernist edicts of medium-specificity announced a newfound "fascination with 'the movies'."[26] (Wiitasalo and her husband, artist Robin Collyer —like American counterparts Brauntuch, Longo and Sherman—were, and are, "inveterate filmgoers.")[27] This engagement with popular film was just one facet of the Picture Generation's—and Wiitasalo's—appropriation of "communally shared 'recognizable images.'"[28] Wiitasalo's cinematic dialogue with television in *Interview* invites analogies with the contemporaneous work of American artist Dara Birnbaum, who manipulated imagery appropriated from popular TV series into complex social allegories.

For Dika, the Pictures Generation's preference for "transformative" imagery reflects an interest in the cinematic body in movement. Although Wiitasalo's distorted bodies cut a very different figure from the elegant athleticism of Goldstein's rotoscoped olympian in *The Jump* (1978), the "mutually absorbing shapes" favoured by the Canadian painter invite comparisons with the pre-cinematic forms of visuality found in *Pierre*.[29] For Alberto Gabriele, Melville's thaumatrope-like reconciliation of opposites within a single, ambiguous image is exemplified by the conflicting portraits of Pierre's father. The work by Wiitasalo that comes closest to the metamorphic optics of *Pierre* is surely *Famous Face* (1987), which transforms Weegee's well-known Polaroid of Marilyn Monroe into a watery vortex. The narcissistic overtones of Wiitasalo's *Famous Face* recall the allegorical significance of the twinned narratives associated with Isabel in *Pierre*

as reflecting “nothing more than a chain of faces that reflect hers.”[30] Like Melville’s “water-gazers,” Wiitasalo’s reflections on the vanity of representation offer more than a superficial recognition of the socially constructed nature of gender roles. Wiitasalo’s plumbing of deceptive depths prompted curator Ulrich Loock to comment that, “The painting *Glass Wall* [1992] seems to be dominated by a *regressus ad infinitum* that permits no escape from the deception of representation.”[31] Never simply a gloss on the media’s potential for simulation and dissimulation then (as Monk would have it), Wiitasalo’s transformative paintings delve into the narcissistic optics of all representation.

GENERAL IDEA: “THE FUNCTION OF AMBIGUITY”

This reconsideration of early work by Tod and Wiitasalo has brought to light fault lines within Monk’s claims about the return of representation as grounded in a renewed commitment to the real. Yet neither Tod nor Wiitasalo can be the “final girl” in this scene of writing (despite the critic-curator’s efforts to claim the artists as his “amanuenses”).[32] Rather, it is Monk’s confrontation with the mythic architecture of “Miss General Idea,” whose intractable *ménage a trois* resists the binary axes of his infamous “Valentine’s Day speech,” that most forcefully exposes inconsistencies in his project. In that lecture, appropriately—and audaciously—delivered at YYZ on February 14, 1984, Monk proposed two “axes of difference” then operative, according to him, within the Toronto art scene:

> [T]he opposition is between representation and expression in general. The other axis of difference is between the current work by men and women in Toronto. This seems predominantly to align itself along the former axis—representation for women, expression for men.[33]

While Monk’s attempt at establishing a Toronto “girl’s club”[34] in the text of this speech is careful to avoid the snares of gender essentialism, the work of the representational artists that he privileges was, as we have already seen, nowhere as secure in its reference to a social “real” as he wished to claim (indeed, the “subjectivity” of Wiitasalo’s pictures verges on neo-expressionism). Moreover, queer artists such as Andy Fabo, whose contemporaneous work could also be labelled neo-expressionist, were quick to note that Monk’s gender-based oppositions left no room for artists identifying outside the binary terms of heteronormative sexuality: “The epithets that Monk assaults his four hapless male artists with,” wrote Fabo, “sounded suspiciously, to these queer ears, like polite, intellectualized versions of the pejoratives that are used to reinforce patriarchal male behaviour.”[35] Monk could only see regressive “spectacles of melancholy resignation or heroic affirmation of subjectivity” in the work of male neo-expressionist painters[36] where others saw a masquerade of traditional tropes of masculinity—in some cases verging on a camp sensibility.

In hindsight, one of the stranger features of Monk's representational argument is the pivotal role that it assigns to General Idea—whose conceptual practice could hardly be described as neo-expressionist. Indeed, Monk goes so far as to posit the return of painting in Toronto as a return "to the strategies of General Idea."[37] This seeming eccentricity points to a crucial distinction between Monk's response to the perceived threat posed by the return of painting and that mounted by his New York counterparts. Rather than any connotation of a revanchist machismo latent in the expressionist *gesture*, it is the risk of a digression from the real inherent in *myth* that troubles Monk.

Monk's quixotic battle against General Idea's "tendency away from the real"[38] in his labyrinthine essay, "Editorials," enacts a dizzying confrontation with the limits of language and representation that resembles Pierre's solitary struggles with writing in the concluding chapters of Melville's novel. Pierre's seemingly endless authorial labours yield the pessimistic recognition that the writer's material "consists of nothing but surface stratified upon surface."[39] Melville's recourse to a geological metaphor to describe the fundamental limitations of his own craft produces an unintended resonance with General Idea's assumption of an archaeological pose following the 1977 destruction of its *1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion*—a turn that, for Monk, represents the *ne plus ultra* of regressive simulation. Monk's frustration with the loss of reference embraced by General Idea's baroque systems of self-mythologization—perhaps an unconscious recognition of the unmanageable ambiguities inherent in his own representational project—is mirrored by Pierre's realization that his pursuit of resemblance has, paradoxically, reduced reality to a meaningless play of signs. Compare these excerpts from Monk, writing with characteristic exasperation about General Idea, and from *Pierre*:

It does not have to be consistent, name a referent, or mean anything: it has a pure sign function of zero symbolic value.[40]

But ignorant of its quantity as yet, or fearful of ascertaining it, like an algebraist, for the real Lucy he, in his scheming thoughts, had substituted but a sign—some empty *x*—and in the ultimate solution of the problem, that empty *x* still figured, not the real Lucy.[41]

The frustrated projects of Monk and Pierre are potent reminders that the ambiguities of the real perpetually exasperate our desire to pin it down with signs and symbols.

A HISTORY HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

In retrospect, Monk's efforts at grounding the return of representation in gender

difference can be recognized as a local manifestation of a more general (and felicitous) "disintegration of male myths of potency and power."[42] But in contrast to New York critics' approach to the politics of the image as an endless play of signs, Monk's writings—despite their misleading similarity to French Theory—reveal an unlikely insistence on the real. The buried speech acts of his early criticism, grounded in a stubborn quest for the local, remain an enduring, if submerged, influence on Toronto's chronic sense of missed connections with its own recent past. In hindsight, Monk's attempt to define a Toronto avant-garde can be likened to Stan Douglas' efforts to assert the neo-pictorialism of Vancouver photo-conceptualism as independent of what he and his peers then viewed as the political naiveté of New York appropriation artists.[43] On the other hand, Tod, Wiitasalo, and General Idea—whose work shares more in common than Monk could admit at the time—leave a strong legacy of representational strategies that, like Melville's *Pierre*, harness the ambiguities of representation to address our perpetual inability to know what pictures want. Toronto's Pictures Generation emerges from this preliminary reassessment as an important chapter in a cultural history that has been hiding in plain sight, despite its own best efforts at dissimulation.

NOTES

1. Jeff Wall's term for a group of artists including Dara Birnbaum, Sarah Charlesworth, Jenny Holzer, Louise Lawler, Sherrie Levine, and Barbara Kruger. Jeff Wall quoted in Douglas Eklund, *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009), 144.

2. Eklund contrasts the exploration of commercial forms undertaken by artists such as Richard Prince with "the period belief, cherished especially dearly by the critic-supporters of the Pictures group, that the artists were involved in some kind of potent political action with their subversions and demythologizing." Eklund, *The Pictures Generation,* 154.

3. See Sholem Krishtalka, "Toronto Curating Itself: An Unhistory," *Canadian Art*, http://www.canadianart.ca/features/2012/06/14/toronto-curating/ (accessed September 3, 2013).

4. Vera Frenkel, "Single Meaning, Double Text," in *Toronto: A Play of History* (Toronto: The Power Plant, 1987), 63.

5. Philip Monk quoted in Krishtalka, "Toronto Curating Itself." Philip Monk, *Struggles with the Image* (Toronto: YYZ, 1988), 137.

6. Barbara Fischer quoted in Krishtalka, "Toronto Curating Itself."

7. Stan Douglas, “Joanne Tod and the Final Girl,” *Joanne Tod* (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery; Toronto: The Power Plant, 1991), 32, 33.

8. Douglas Eklund calls Toronto’s A Space gallery “the direct model for Hallwalls,” and highlights the formative influence of Suzy Lake on Cindy Sherman. Douglas Eklund, *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven, CT, 2009), 81, 85.

9. “[P]ictures are characterized by something which, though often remarked, is insufficiently understood: that they are extremely difficult to distinguish at the level of their content; that they are to an extraordinary degree opaque to meaning.”Douglas Crimp, *Pictures* (New York: Artists Space, 1977), 9.

10. See Eklund, *The Pictures Generation*, 123, 124; Monk, *Struggles with the Image*, 187. See also: Helen Molesworth, “House Work and Art Work,” *Art After Conceptual Art*, eds. Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2006), 67-84.

11. Luis Jacob, “*Glamour Is Theft: A User’s Guide to General Idea*,” *C*, no. 119 (2013): 60.

12. Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *October* 12 (1980): 67-86. See also: Benjamin Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” eds. Alexander Alberro and Sabeth Buchmann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press; Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2006), 27-51.

13. See Bryan C. Short, “Multitudinous God-omnipresent, Coral Insects: Pip, Isabel, and Melville’s Miltonic Sublime,” *Leviathan* 4, nos. 1-2 (2002): 7-28.

14. Jens Hoffmann, *Moby-Dick* (San Francisco: CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 2009), 11.

15. Alberto Gabriele, “Traces and Origins, Signs and Meanings: Analogy and the Pre-cinematic Imagination in Melville’s *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities*,” *Leviathan* 15, no. 1 (2013): 50.

16. Monk, *Struggles with the Image*, 126.

17. Herman Melville, *Pierre; or, The Ambiguities* (1852; repr., New York: Penguin, 1996), 157.

18. Monk, *Struggles with the Image*, 188.

19. Monk, *Struggles with the Image*, 205. See Monk’s theorization of speech acts

in the essays “The Zero Machine” and “Coming to Speech,” reprinted in *Struggles with the Image*, 45-77.

20. Monk, *Struggles with the Image*, 203.

21. Bruce Grenville, “Joanne Tod: The Space of Difference,” *Joanne Tod* (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery; Toronto: The Power Plant, 1991), 17.

22. Gabriele, “Traces and Origins,” 50.

23. Melville, *Pierre*, 149. See also Philip Monk, “Shirley Wiitasalo: Dissembling Representation,” *Shirley Wiitasalo* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1987), 8.

24. Shirley Wiitasalo quoted in Ulrich Loock, *René | Shirley Wiitasalo* (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 1993), 29.

25. Eklund, *The Pictures Generation*, 118.

26. Vera Dika, *The (Moving) Pictures Generation: The Cinematic Impulse in Downtown New York Art and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 4.

27. Eklund, *The Pictures Generation*, 135.

28. ibid., 100.

29. Gabriele, “Traces and Origins,” 52.

30. Short, “Multitudinous God-omnipresent,” 25.

31. Ulrich Loock, *René | Shirley Wiitasalo*, 30.

32. Melville, *Pierre*, 349; see also Douglas, “Joanne Tod and the Final Girl.”

33. Monk, *Struggles with the Image*, 189-90.

34. Eklund, *The Pictures Generation*, 161.

35. Andy Fabo, “Dead Centre: Views on the Curatorial Arena in Toronto,” *M5V*, no. 3 (1992): 8.

36. Monk, *Struggles with the Image*, 193.

37. ibid., 186.

38. ibid., 138.

39. Melville, *Pierre*, 285.

40. Monk, *Struggles with the Image*, 147.

41. Melville, *Pierre*, 181.

42. Eklund, *The Pictures Generation*, 166.

43. Douglas, “Joanne Tod and the Final Girl,” 33.

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