The Wordworks of BARBARA ASTMAN

Barbara Astman se sert de films 35 mm, de Polaroids, de Xerox, pour jouer avec les mots et les images. Elle produit ainsi un commentaire ambigü mais séduisant et reconnaissable du style de vie des années '70.

In 1968, an artistic application of the traditional skill of quilt making made itself agreeable to the Canadian public. *Reason over Passion/La Raison avant la passion,* slogans fashioned in official tongues and womancraft, leapt into the populist vanguard with artist Joyce Wieland, the Canadian spectre of Betsy Ross. Permanently softened were the edges of art and craft. 'Making Art' was in vogue. Historians both artistic and political found authority in works hitherto labelled gentle.

It was in this generous climate that Barbara Astman's early work emerged. Astman had studied silversmithing at the Rochester Institute of Technology, moving in 1970 to the Ontario College of Art to study sculpture. Feeling the restrictions of these disciplines, Astman abandoned them one year later, turning at once to an irreverent dalliance with materials: plastic flowers; grass mats; velvet ribbon; brocade; silk; photographs—Polaroid, Xeroxes, booth strips and 35mm printed on paper or photo linen which could be sewn, embroidered, appliquéd, or stuffed.

Astman's enjoyment extended to her titles, where word play prologued her fantasies, punned with the visuals, hinted at intimacy, named her friends (Ira, Gayle, Jake, and her parents, Bert and George) and introduced herself.

Hommage to Love Comics (1973) is a five-frame sequence, bordered in lace, of two women and a man standing laughing together in the sunshine. The women wear only bikini bottoms; the man is naked but his face is concealed by a series of comic book male heads wearing the appropriate expressions, from dread to elation. Astman has lifted her dialogue from her comic book sources ('But a girl can't date forever') and affixed these balloons over her subjects' heads. The narration, according to formula, is isolated in one corner. The juxtaposition of these three 'natural' bodies with the verbal evidence of 'hang-ups' and the self-caricatured values of the fifties works on a very simple level, as an entertainment for the converted.

Astman's work over the next four years became more economical, at least in her mixing of media. Concentration in specific areas produced series in Polaroid and Xerox that translated her earlier use of fabric into rich, surface texture. Except for descriptive titles, Astman put aside her experimentation with words, picking it up again in 1976 with a travel fantasy series done in Xeroxed découpage. Simply, Astman would photograph friends at home, and by changing the background of the photographs with postcards, reproductions, or maps, send them on an imaginary journey. Pencilled in, in her own hand, are such captions as 'Mary Anne in Daytona Beach . . .,' and 'spending the day in Pompano Beach'—the kind of label found in family albums to detail and immortalize an event.

Astman refers to these pieces in her introduction to the *Visual Narrative Series* (1978-79) where she places the beginning of her formal use of language.

'The story board notion still prevails, only now the stories are taking on a greater importance than in the past. I am trying to deal with the notion of an equal balance between words and images, as opposed to words describing images or images describing words. I arrive at the narratives through a number of ways, including discussions with each person while photographing, insights into that person through years of friendship, and my own emotional space at the time of writing. Thus, the pieces are based on biographical and autobiographical information. Sometimes I use someone else's image, but I know that the words relate directly back to me. In other instances the words relate very closely to the person in the photograph. I have a desire to expose the viewer to my thoughts, my feelings; to extend a notion of intimacy, yet somehow keeping it all at a distance. The narratives tend to deal with dialogue, jumping from "he said," "she said," "they thought," etc., so that you can sometimes see both sides of the story.'[1]

Her format is SX-70 Polaroid in series: six photos of one person against the same background, laid out in two horizontal rows. These Polaroids were treated as maquettes for the final enlargement, which was further altered with hand tinting applied to accent the mood of the assemblage.

Immediately, one rushes back to her enlarged photo booth strips, though here the exercise is to be taken more seriously. Gesture and adjustment are measured as for seismic impact. Her subjects, or actors, must account for motivation.

All of this malaise is verbalized in short statements, typed on the white borders of the originals and accordingly enlarged. Their flow is as confined as the image, yielding a stylistic psycho-sportscast, a choppy commentary, imprisoned by design.

A woman sits in a rattan chair which fills the background. She wears a white blouse and a heart pendant around her neck.

'she knew when he went away it would change
he left forever and expected no change
she tried to explain where it all went
she knew it could never be the same
he was convinced all could be mended
she knew the truth but kept it to herself.'

A stylish blonde woman is dressed all in white with a dark belt. In the bottom row, she adds a short, dark jacket. The room is stark, the only detail a window.

'she talked about playing games
and he knew he could come out the loser
she needed to be in control
she pretended to take control of him

Martha Langford

yet secretly knew she was incapable
she secretly wished he would take control.'

A recent bit of advertising comes to mind. A man, dressed in evening clothes, stands before his mirror. He puts the finishing touches on his costume and tries out inflections on his request for status: '. . . Chivas please . . . a Chivas please . . . please a Chivas Regal.' Astman's narratives, though varied in subject or object, echo this frightening obsession. In six views of the model, we are meted out equal

she felt uncomfortable around him
he knew but he let her answer slip away
she pretended not to notice.'

To feel estranged together was to touch. Astman reaches into this network; she chooses the players, states then stills their complaints. Matter-of-fact, too passive to be moving, these are the dispossessed announcers of our current affairs.

It would be easy, however, to fall in love with Barbara Astman's newest pieces: *untitled, i was thinking of you.* With all the luxuriant colour of her first

perfect symbiosis; where there are letters, there is no image, and so the reverse.

Again, the format is the SX-70 print, greatly enlarged, but the individual image construction has been so simplified, so softened (here no flash is used) that the effect is to intensify, to gather the forces previously deployed over six photographs.

Astman's single likeness is as expressive as the jittery poses of the previous series and far more enduring. Her mouth, smeared by motion, her

30" × 40" color mural

doses of intensity and chanted a six line poem in epidermal paranoia.

'Getting in touch' and 'coping,' mutants of understanding, guided the summer before disco. It was a period when uneasiness, as common as the sniffles, traded actively on the human market.

A woman, Astman, wearing black with a flowered vest, perches on a straight-back chair set against a blue leafy wallpaper.
'she told him she was uncomfortable with herself
and she was uncomfortable around her friends too
he asked if she was uncomfortable around him

appliqués and collages, the viewer is absolved from the harsh white apertures, the imposing grid of the composite pieces. Suddenly, the confrontation is with a life-sized, agreeably proportioned woman, clothed in pinks, reds, blacks, greens, and blues, posed standing against luminous curtain backdrops. The subject, the artist, is holding for nearly every installation an object chosen for its symbolic, light, or pigmentary value. Letters have now been integrated into the whole: Astman has taken the developing SX-70 model and typed on the emulsion's soft plastic cover. The characters are tender, malleable squiggles. Message and image exist in

jaw line, the darkened hollows in her cheeks, and the free hand or hands open, touching thigh, stomach, groping for balance in the folds of the backdrop—these are her gesturing tools. The eyes are rarely seen.

Equally mysterious are her messages. Though there can be no argument with the visual impact of the words, reading them is another question. Vastly enlarged, the characters begin to disintegrate. Phrases run off the edge, misspellings cannot be corrected, and there is no punctuation. The urgency of creation, working against a hardening emulsion, is a constructional symbol for the flood of memory, for that urge to record before forgetfulness or

inhibition once more take control. By repetition, by osmosis, *dear (friend) i have been thinking* has touched the senses with the portentious thrill of an unmailed letter. But what is Astman actually saying?

'dear gray i was thinking about you a wondering if you remember when we w jazz festival in ithaca and camped o friends place and everyone got crab but the music was excellent and you started an affair with margot and w michael saw tina again and i felt l out from both your lives not wantin romance but expecting friendship he worked out and that was the day tha met him and that was the beginning o four years that are now over but t,

Here in twelve short lines we have a foreign rendezvous, communal living, lice, two affairs observed, alienation, disappointment, one affair undertaken and ended. She uses three persons' names and one place name. Her own presence is implied and there is a mystery man.

This example is not one sensational standout; we have drugs, nervous breakdowns, more exotic place names, a plenitude of relationships (mostly intimate, often sexual), fear, flirtation, famous people, selfishness, social games, exclusive circles, betrayal, blood, alcoholism, homosexuality, escape, death by marriage, death by natural causes, 'oysters and champagne.' It's a heady journey, hastened by the skimming of the difficult script.

Communication is highly impressionistic but the message finally filters through: here are the confessions of a seventies' survivor. Suddenly, the whole extravaganza rings as hollow as the balloons in the love comics parody.

Astman calls this memory[2] and I will not dispute it. Truth or invention, what is central is Astman's subscription to the recent rage to 'tell all,' so brilliantly satirized in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*.

Atwood's heroine leads the double life of a true romance writer and poetess célèbre. Her poetry is written in a hypnotic state, induced by staring at a candle (an appealing parallel to Astman's pressured typing). The Lady Oracle is acclaimed for the courage and candor of her poetry. The public buys this publicized glimpse of flesh and soul. Even her husband believes he is implicated. In fact, the good stuff is in soft cover. Her pulp fiction, published under a pseudonym, charts her life: her romance with a count, travel abroad, her brush with anarchists, her affair with an artist, her journeys into the mystic unknown—the full liberation of her fat, encumbered self into a desirable, adventurous woman. *Lady Oracle* draws such a delicate balance between the inner structure (the romantic fiction by the heroine) and the exoskeleton (her actual life), that the continuous exchange is almost dizzying. But it is always hilarious and the underlying rebuke directed at those who would sully the fiction maker with truth is a subtly-secreted indoctrination.

It would be more immediately pleasing if one could attribute such wickedness to Astman. She is capable of humour; her early work proved it, and surely phrases such as 'you had a face i could never forget and it set my heart beating double pace' or the choice of a carrot, pointing down, as a prop for her lines on an all-male bar are intended to be funny. But her work, overall, is not humorous.

Other approaches are equally tenuous. We are not moved; the melodramatic writing and Astman's chronic abdication of complicity (except when guilt is her conveyance 'dear lorne') promote equal detachment in the viewer. Her delivery is poor with illegibility aping subtlety and vague reference standing for detail. Her stories live and die within her circle. Thrust before the public, they are titillating confirmations of a lifestyle but they reveal nothing new.

Astman writes: 'I have chosen to appear in each image to maintain the human element. . . . I have cropped my face at a variety of levels. I did not feel the necessity to completely identify myself any further than to establish the human form as female.'[3]

Accessibility is perhaps her intention but she succeeds instead in commonness, for her work falls into a vast catalogue of confession lately unleashed by grateful publishers on a fame-hungry, secret-toothed public.

To paraphrase Astman: dear ira i was thinking of you and how we met in 1973 in barbara s photographs you were gazing at cows there were a lot of organic elements back then now i read this letter that says you left barbara and that the shock made her deny it and i cannot help but wonder if you and all her friends can be both angels and tormentors or if its simply that times have changed.

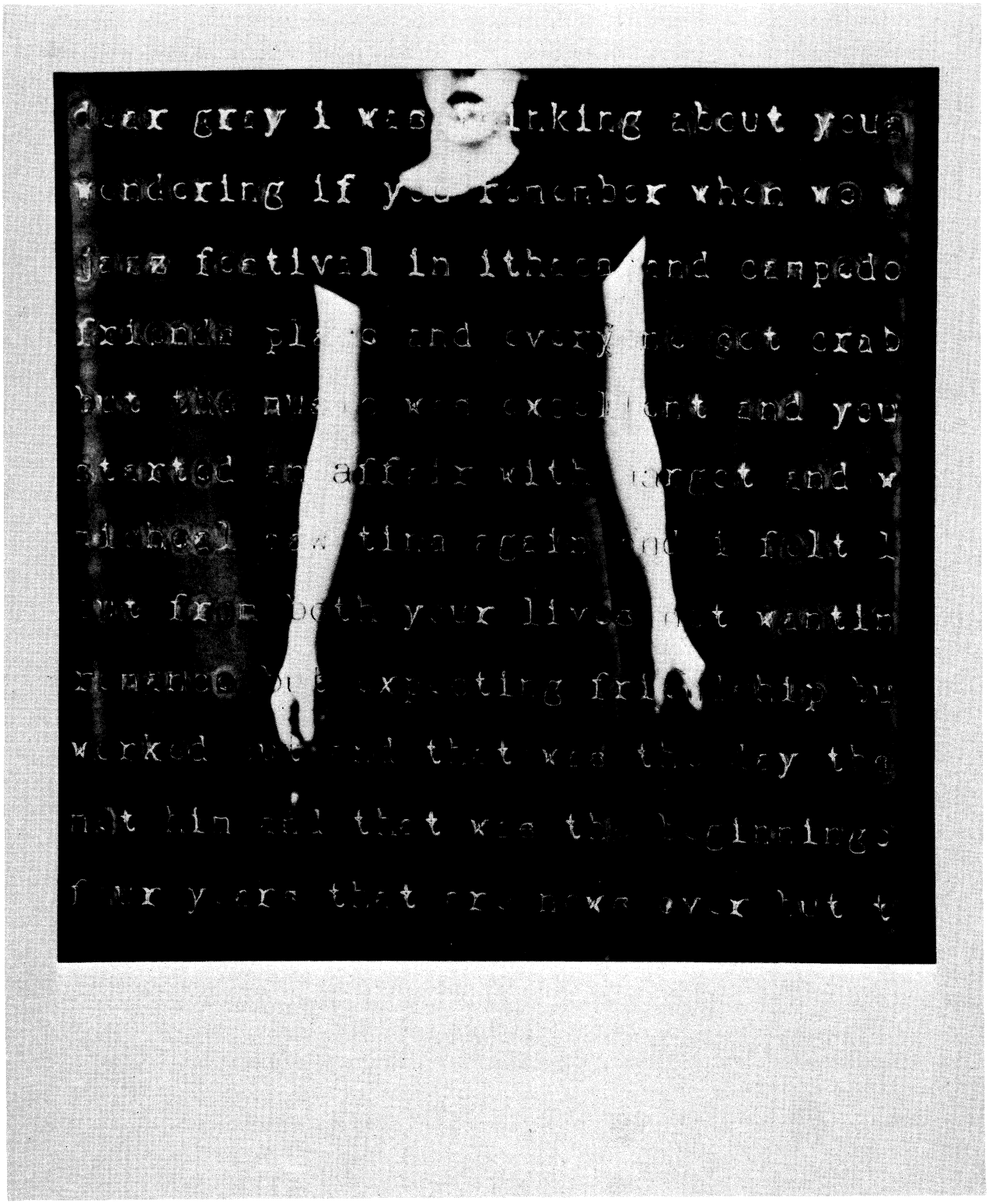
The simplicity of love, harmony, and sunshine, the escape into nostalgia and documented fantasy, the sterility and futility of mechanized self-probing, and now, the selling of the self, the amoral, experiential enema that says 'accept this for what it was—I was there'—we passed through all that in the seventies and we have seen it all in Astman's work. Her work is powerfully, fascinatingly fashionable, and with these words I extol it, for rarely can an artist make of herself so seductively shiny a mirror that people rush forward to grasp their own image.

Astman is not profound and we have not been so either. She is not visionary and neither, for the most part, are we. At the close of this harsh and egocentric decade, most of us are happy for the promise of change. We can examine the trends of optimism in Astman's next recording.

[1]Barbara Astman, *The Winnipeg Perspective 1979-Photo/Extended Dimensions*, (The Winnipeg Art Gallery, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1979), p. 8.

[2]Barbara Astman, from a written statement on the work, 1980.

[3]Ibid.



4' × 5' color mural