

Douglas Gordon: Filmic Re-Presentation(s).

Douglas Gordon at the Vancouver Art Gallery, March 9 to June 16, 2002
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A little square of light levitates at eye-level before a black wall. Moving closer, the beam resolves into an image of an inverted housefly. Even before considering the picture, the viewer will be amazed by this spare illusion. While touch reveals the image to be flush with the wall, the eye remains unconvinced: the glowing square seems to hover at least four inches into space. The second surprise is a sudden movement. The work is not a miniature light box but a tiny video monitor. Every few seconds, in a futile attempt to right itself, the fly kicks furiously, then, just as suddenly, stops. That the struggle in this animated still life has no effect suggests that the insect is glued to the table.

Film Noir (Fly) is perhaps the most uncanny and affecting work in *Douglas Gordon* at the Vancouver Art Gallery. In an exhibition replete with spectacle—generously spaced large, projected video installations, photographs and wall texts—this postage stamp-sized video, this easily overlooked punctuation, steals the show.

Scottish artist Douglas Gordon is famous for winning the Turner Prize while still in his twenties (1996) and for his re-presentations of classic Hollywood *film noir* movies. I went to this exhibition prepared for disappointment: What is a 35-year-old artist doing having a retrospective? How could he fill such a huge space? I expected cleverness spread thinly.

The work *is* clever, in the best and fullest sense of the word. Each installation is well crafted, intelligent and witty. Gordon is a conceptual artist interested in identity, reproduction, authorship, audience and pleasure as they are filtered through his sensibility. But his is not a sore thumb identity politics. Instead, Gordon's works are the records and experiments of a restless imagination interested in the very processes of being and becoming. Rather than burden us with his wounds and plead for empathy, he appears amused by his own construction and wants to pass on this curiosity and his findings to viewers. Horace Walpole once said, "This world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel." Douglas Gordon seems to be a thinker interested in feelings--interested in somewhat the same way as Hitchcock and the Marquis de Sade were.

The exhibition has a lean fullness. Russell Ferguson—who curated the show for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles—and the staff at the VAG, must be given credit for managing the space so effectively. A benefit of a well-designed exhibition (especially of conceptual art) is that now, weeks later, because the works are so simple, so clearly conceived, executed and presented, I can continue to play with them in my mind, work out their relationship to each other and relate them to my daily lived experience. Among the indelible images are a video in which two hands have graphic sex; a photograph of a man with the word *guilty* tattooed on his back (it is written in reverse, so he can read it correctly in a mirror); and a photograph of a tattooed black dot, or large period, set stigmata-like in the center of a man's hand.

Among the many installations is, of course, Gordon's famous *24-Hour Psycho*—a silent, crawling version of the Hitchcock thriller. The idea is simple and riveting. While it would be impossible to maintain attention for the day long run of the film, stumbling into sections is oddly

intoxicating. You find yourself attending to ridiculous details, held in frustrated anticipation, wanting to leave and yet willing to wait to for the next thrilling change in Janet Leigh's expression. An artwork for autistics, the world is silenced and slowed for leisurely consumption. Especially during the shower scene, we are not only made self-conscious of our voyeurism but are given ample time to interrogate it—if we don't flee first.

Like Hitchcock, Gordon is interested in affect, and in reception more than expression. Both are also preoccupied with making the viewer aware of the sadomasochism that underlies the film experience. *Film Noir (Fly)* is an eloquent metaphor that not only describes the director—who fixes the fly to the table and the *noir* hero to his dark fate—as a sadist but implicates the viewer in the same project. Gordon reminds us that when we look at the screen, we all share something with Norman Bates. Similarly, knowing that the many tattoos pictured in his other works are real—that there is a real man who, for the rest of his life, will live with his decision to let Gordon tattoo three inches of his index finger black, *Three Inches (Black)*—is a significant part of the work and Gordon's sensibility.

In an interview with David Sylvester, Douglas Gordon explains that during his art school years, he lost pleasure in watching movies. The analytical skills he learned caused him to read and deconstruct the mechanisms of the film rather than just enjoy the movie. While the work in this exhibition can be *read*, they are constructed to encourage less reading and more enjoying. There is a great pleasure to be found in turning off the meaning making machine in our heads and letting the work work on us. I think Gordon uses film noir movies because he likes them, and he likes them because they offer a glimpse at the darker aspects of the culture that constructed him. Utilitarian nostalgia provides the informing principals of those who raised us. These secret meanings are less read than understood. I have nothing to say before *Film Noir (Fly)* and nothing I can say will help. And yet I am flooded by memories of my own petty cruelties.