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Who, who, who is Michael Fernandes?

Though he started out as a painter in the sixties, Michael Fernandes has focussed on less traditional media since the late seventies. Nowadays he seems intent on paring his practice down to an almost object-less art. Known for his text works (written and recorded), Fernandes has recently abandoned even language, with a series of unscripted actions in the public arena of the street. Meanwhile, the relationship between art and audience remains the conceptual underpinning of his work.

In 1986, during the NATO conference in Halifax, Fernandes participated in an exhibition titled *Art Against Militarism* at the Anna Leonowens Gallery of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. His text piece in the window of the gallery read, "I am a terrorist." Given that other work in the show addressed hot political and social issues of the day, Fernandes's claim seemed to be poking fun at the earnest desire of artists to make statements about power and privilege. Through his own political statement Fernandes called into question the very notion of art being used against anything, save itself.

A similarly self-reflexive critique was evident in *media/culture/text*, curated by Cindy Richmond for the Mackenzie Art Centre and distributed as an insert in *C* #25 (Spring 1990). Here, Fernandes presented a text chiding readers for seeking critical authority outside of the things made by artists. "The works are important in themselves," he wrote, "and interpreters or commentators only distort them." He thus used his inclusion in *C* to question the *raison d'être* of this and every other art magazine.

Examples abound of Fernandes's lack of deference to art institutions and other artists. An audio work in a NSCAD faculty show (1996) invited the listener, in conspiratorial tones, to buy a monkey. The piece ran throughout the course of the exhibition and Fernandes steadfastly vetoed requests to turn it off during the gallery talks of other artists in the show. Garry Neill Kennedy, then president of the College, had to present his work at a graduate seminar accompanied by Fernandes's wheedling entreaties to buy his monkey.

For the 1990 exhibition *Walls* at Toronto's Power Plant Gallery, Fernandes showed work that seemed to take on American artist Adrian Piper, whose touring 20-year retrospective, organized by the

Alternative Museum in New York, was also on display. Fernandes countered Piper's politically charged musings on race with "I am not black / You are not white," a work consisting of two laser-prints (from photographs) with text and an audio component. In one image, a blurred black face stared out at us; beside it was a life-size silhouette of Fernandes's head and a text that read, "I am not black, you are not white." An audiotape sporadically boomed the spoken words, "Who, who, who are you?" A native of Trinidad (his mother black, his father white), Fernandes could play the race card in other ways but chose to trump with his distrust of labels. In an interview with Stephen Horne and Andrew Forster, he explained: "It's not exclusive. I'm not saying you're on that side, I'm on this side. Well, in some ways it's saying that we're all one. It's aiming for that."ⁱ

There is a utopian strain here, an undercurrent that proposes a different way of being in the world. Rather than citing contemporary theoretical underpinnings for his practice, Fernandes seems to follow Plato's dictum, "Know thyself," and his work functions like a Platonic dialogue with the artist as Socratic questioner – opening everything, especially himself, to scrutiny. He doesn't sit on the fence or retreat from taking a stand. Rather, he consistently puts into play the notion that everything we think we know may be false, that we need to revisit everything.

His underlying idealism aside, Fernandes can be cutting in the way that he pokes fun at institutions and practices of the art world. Biting the hand that feeds him is part and parcel of his practice. Yet, far from attempting to educate an audience, he is more likely to parody such pretension. In perhaps his clearest statement on the subject, he presented a silhouette of his head in profile with the legend, "A major work in progress." Through such propositions he roots his practice in the process of learning, avoiding the teaching and preaching that bedevils so much politicized art. He might even go so far as to distance himself from what his listeners might learn. "I have lost my parrot," goes one text-work. "If you find it I want you to know that I am not responsible for what it says." (Originally presented in French for *sensible*, published in 1992 by Montreal's galerie articule and in Spanish as a poster for *Calaf Art Public 99* in Barcelona.)

Fernandes uses humour to draw people in, to make them comfortable and receptive to his gentle and pointed questioning. Humour leavens his persistent queries, laughter softening the work's occasional sharp edges. His reliance on text, whether written or spoken, ensures that his audience goes through a process of internalizing it. This process may be disruptive. When faced with the script, "I am a terrorist," viewers read a claim that they would (most likely) never conceive of uttering themselves. More often however, the voice in Fernandes's work is conspiratorial, inviting us to play along.

In “A Chance to Get it Right,” a 1990 installation at Halifax’s now defunct OO Gallery, Fernandes presented a work that could be viewed from the street through the gallery window. Passersby saw an open coffin on trestle legs. On the floor, in vinyl letters, was a text: “I know what you guys are up to so keep it down I’m trying to sleep.” It is, of course, a trope of modern art to compare viewers to sleepwalkers, in need of the artist to awaken them, to re-educate him. In this work Fernandes inverts the notion, anticipating that it is passing viewers who will be up to some disturbing mischief.

Fernandes refuses the stance of artist as outsider; the idea of sending “postcards from the edge” is alien to his practice. While talking about his art, Fernandes points at me with his index finger, thumb cocked like a hammer (the familiar shooting gesture). “When you point at someone else,” he says, “three fingers point back at you.” It is this pointing back that fascinates him – what he reveals of himself when addressing others.

Despite his apparent resistance within the politicized group exhibition, Fernandes does make work that responds directly to current events, and when doing so his instinct is compassionate. When an historic church was burnt in Halifax in 1994, he made a piece that included a photo of the church’s steeple collapsing into the burning roof and hung it in the street level window of the OO Gallery. Text on the window read, “Honey, what I would really like is to spend more time with you.” The fire was being blamed on kids, specifically latch-key kids; Fernandes responded with the imagined regret of a parent. There is no blame in this work, nor any judgement. Rather, what he presents is a compassionate response to a social problem.

Fernandes has frequently produced works that address the street (text in windows, banners, etc.) and, as with “Free Haircuts” at eye level gallery, Halifax, (1998), he has occasionally explored unorthodox lures inviting gallery entrance. But in recent months he has taken himself into the street. As his contribution to the exhibition *Flag Show* at the Anna Leonowens Gallery, he stood on a street in Halifax for a day, an ice-cream bucket at his feet. For this work, which he titled “I am for Real,” he set only three rules: he wouldn’t ask for money, he wouldn’t label what he was doing as art, and he was connected to the bucket. He explained that he wanted to explore the feeling that people have when they pass panhandlers. “It was difficult for many people,” he said. “I had friends come up to me who were really concerned, who asked me if I had lost my job.” His oblique answers to queries convinced some that he was mentally ill; others put money in his bucket; most walked on by. When asked directly what he was doing he responded, “I’m just standing here” or “I’m working.”

What does one make of such an action – performed outside of a gallery with no audience gathered to watch, no publicity set in play, no administrator to contextualize the performance for viewers. It remained a public event, of course, with a personal purpose. He was trying to learn something, he said, about himself and his community. But what was learned, he still can't articulate. When invited to participate in Sackville's *I Can't Believe it's You, I Can't Believe it's True: Symposium of Art* last fall. Fernandes revisited this performance idea with variations. The Sackville work, titled "Above All Else," took place over four days. The artist stood in various busy sites around town, including in front of the post office. The first day he had an empty beer case (in-lieu of the ice cream bucket) and many people put money in it. Two young men even counted the money already in the bucket and then made up the difference that would enable him to buy a case of beer. Others brought him food or offered to buy him a meal. On the second day, he returned without the box. He was almost arrested for vagrancy that day and had to talk his way out of it. On the third day he left a mound of apples in his place outside the post office – an offering, perhaps, for the kindness he was shown. On the fourth day he returned to standing, this time wearing a sign that read, "I'm not part of Mount A or any type of psychological experiment." On one of the earlier days he had overheard two people write off his behaviour in these terms. Apparently, being part of "Mount A" (Mount Allison University) explains a lot of typical behaviour in Sackville. When asked directly what he was doing Fernandes would explain, engaging people in long conversations about his motivations. But he never just called it art, feeling that to do so provided an easy way out, a safe box in which to store the experience.

Performance hasn't wholly supplanted Fernandes's use of other media. He still shows photographs and text, most recently in the exhibition *Team Work* at SAW Gallery in Ottawa, where he painted a series of snapshots with text captions provided by his thirty-year-old son. Here, as elsewhere, Fernandes presented work without additional commentary – leaving people to make of it what they could. It often seems that the art in his work is something that the viewer makes. Fernandes merely provides the materials, lays them out for us to construct something.

"The fantasy out the window," runs a text piece shown in the 1990 exhibition *Walls*. The work as originally commissioned for the Cabinet Meeting Room of then Ontario Premier David Peterson. The text is placed either near or on a window, directing the viewer's gaze to the world outside – a world, Fernandes seems to imply, no mere (nor perhaps less) real than that inside. So where is reality to be found? Fernandes is always elusive, mischievously undermining any system that attempts to delimit what he does. He has described his mercurial practice as "time-release work," consisting of actions and

concepts that unfold in the viewer's mind over time. Such unfolding is the work's core. It is how we know that we have internalized it and carried it away with us.

i Find source – Power Plant Catalogue, Walls