

ART PAPERS

Gary Kennedy and Joanna Malinowska
By Peter Dykhuis and Jayne Wark

In 1975 Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader departed Cape Cod in his thirteen foot sailboat bound for Europe. This project 'In Search of the Miraculous', was the second stage of a proposed trilogy. Preceded by Part One, a midnight walk in his newly adopted Los Angeles, it was to be followed by Part Three a ramble in Amsterdam. Radio contact with Ader lost after three weeks at sea. His semi-submerged vessel was found adrift ten months later but his body was never recovered. Yet Ader, it seems, has sailed into myth.

Joanna Malinowska's four channel video installation 'In Search of the Miraculous Continued...' blurs everyday events with poetic, emotive meta-gestures in a way that recalls Ader's practice. In 'Part I', an elegantly dressed woman bumps into the reclusive Polish celebrity pianist, Piotr Anderszewski to be a gentleman as he helps the woman retrieve the bouncing fruit.

'Part III' (Preaching the Avant Garde to a Commuter) also plays with chance musical contexts. Here, a female pianist performs John Cage's 4'33" on a toy piano in a crowded New York subway car. Modifying the original concert hall context of the piece, the "silence" that fills the 4'33" is the blasé indifference of hard-bitten New Yorkers toughing out their day on underground rails.

Malinowska's other two videos leave the bustle of New York to find their subject in Canada's Arctic. Playing on early art film experiments, "Nunat Erucilkai- A Village Without Daylight" features a light bulb that switched on and off in sync with the voice-over of an archival Inuit recording of the titular story. This piece may equate artificial light with miracle in the midwinter Arctic darkness. It may also call for the survival of remote, ancient stories in the face of encroaching modernity.

Synthesizing her interest in music, pianists, and the frozen Arctic, Malinowska's 'Part II' presents one continuous video shot of a solar powered boombox playing Glen Gould's 1981 recording of Bach's 'Goldberg Variations'. Since the equipment was abandoned in the tundra, the cultural presence of Bach and Gould might still be audible today if the installation survived storm seasons. This would be truly miraculous but, as with Ader's 'Part II', highly unlikely.

Malinowska's poetic videos may seem to have little correlation to the far more prosaic work of Gary Neill Kennedy. Yet, the central, tent-like structure that houses her monitors evokes militarism, a concept central to Kennedy's work. Executed in his hallmark font "Super Star Shadow", which is also used to inscribe numbers on US Navy warships, Kennedy's floor-to-ceiling wall painting of the phrase "Shit Happens" colonizes the entire gallery. Hovering between communication and pleasing abstract patterns, Kennedy's decoratively colored, superhuman-scaled letters belie his ominous schema.

When asked about the lack of military progress in the American-led "Global War on Terror" campaign in Iraq, Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld retorted with a verbal shrug: "Stuff Happens." Like everyone else, Kennedy knew what he really meant to say. Herein lies Kennedy's low-key but steady critical weave of politics with art. In "SHIT HAPPENS", as with many of his previous projects that analyze the history of war, empire, and colonization, he selected colors with evocative names like Arabesque, Persian Green, Arabian Night and Persian Gulf from the commercial manufacturers Pratt & Lambert, Pittsburg Paint and St Claire Paint. To sharpen the point, Kennedy strategically inserted smaller rectangles of striped colors that simultaneously quote hardedge modernist abstraction and represent the ribbon patterns of new,

commemorative medals for War on Terrorism Service, Iraq Campaign, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and so on. Together, these paintings and the meta-text SHIT HAPPENS make it clear that Kennedy is pulling no punches. The military can wallpaper over cracked reality invent medals of honor to give to the wounded, call victims "heroes" or casualties of war "collateral damage", but not all is unfolding as planned in Rummy's war.

It is significant that CANADA gallery's programmers juxtaposed the works of these two artists in "SHIT HAPPENS/ In Search of the Miraculous Continued..." (April 29- June 4 2006). While Malinowska's fanciful engagement with Bas Jan Ader may seem somewhat at odds with Kennedy's unequivocal directness, both artists do quote sources that reflect current events. Ader's search for the miraculous led him to embark on a voyage across the ocean in a very small boat, confident in his past nautical abilities. But it didn't work out this time. Rumsfeld & Co optimistically initiated a shock and awe Iraqi invasion that would expend American control on the Middle East. Hampered by intelligence failures and a military force too small for the job, the war on terror has foundered in the sea swells of resistant street fighting, looming civil war and mounting body counts on all sides. Missions are not always accomplished. Shit happens, indeed.