

AVENUE – Questions & Artists

Out of many, they are one

Leah Sandals, *National Post* Published: Thursday, December 11, 2008



Althea Thauberger / Susan Hobbs
Gallery

Treeplanters in northern Alberta form
the word "Canada," 2005

Whether you're managing surly relatives at a holiday party or, perhaps more likely of late, shuffling testy MPs in a political party, group dynamics can run from awkward to cutthroat. Yet Vancouver artist Althea Thauberger thrives on these difficulties, creating collaborative works that lever social challenges into art. Here to discuss a show that's just opened at Toronto's Susan Hobbs Gallery, Thauberger pushes participation to Leah Sandals.

Q In your art career, you've collaborated with many different groups of people - from military wives in San Diego to conscientious objectors in Germany. What do you enjoy about working with groups, particularly ones with conflicting perspectives?

A I always learn a lot when I work with a group that's a bit outside of my comfort zone. It's almost always pretty humbling, and forces me to re-evaluate myself and my relationship with the world.

My more involved projects usually establish a framework resembling social, political or economic structures. Finding a freedom within structure - or better yet, challenging structure - happens when you work with groups, and often leaves me, the artist, not entirely in control.

Even if these challenging moments occur by accident, they're usually transformational and beautiful. That's what I enjoy most about this type of work.

Q What groups do we see in your three photographs on display in Toronto?

A CANADA is a photograph of treeplanters on a day off in northern Alberta. ARBEIT was made with a group of teenaged protesters on May Day in Berlin. 2x3x8 features eight young German men doing mandatory social service in lieu of military duty.

Q Where did you meet these groups, and how did you get them to make art with you?

A CANADA was made in summer, 2005, when I spent several months living and working with a group of treeplanters. One of the camps was in this rather bucolic setting next to a creek. It was my idea to ask the planters to spell the name of our nation with their bodies, and they thought it was amusing to play with the kind of soft nationalism that is our status quo.

When I was living in Berlin in 2006, I spent May 1 wandering the streets with my camera. May Day is still a major political event there, with the tone now more like a

district-wide throwdown than mass civil disobedience. I was thinking about the contradictions between the history of May 1 and the realities playing out on the street. Then I was offered a beer by some teenagers. They wanted me to take their picture, and I suggested we stage a tableau. Together we decided on the word arbeit, which means roughly "job" or "work," though it has fraught meanings in Germany.

2x3x8 is part of an extended project. That same year, in Berlin, I negotiated with the national Zivildienst authorities that coordinate service for conscientious objectors. Eight Berlin-based Zivis, as they are called, were allowed to work on an art project with me as part of their state service. After discussions and improv sessions, we collectively wrote and produced a performance, film and publication. The photograph 2x3x8 was made as a kind of summary image.

Q The last few weeks in Canadian politics have seemed to indicate group strife rather than group cohesion. What's your take on current events given your experience with groups?

A Personally, I think it's cool that something remotely radical is actually going down in Canadian politics. I don't think of this fissure as a crisis in negative terms, as we've had something like that until this breaking point with an extremist Prime Minister, an inept opposition and a largely comatose public. In terms of group dynamics, I think strife is almost always accompanied by productive change. So I think of this political flux as potentially productive in relation to the dysfunction that preceded it.

Q What are you working on now?

A I'm supposed to go to Afghanistan as a war artist in the near future, but my dates keep getting bumped back. So the main thing I'm working on now is a book on a public event I organized with Artspeak in Vancouver. For three hours on the night of Sept. 30, we closed the 200 block of Carrall Street to car traffic. The block was lit with cinema lights and we invited diverse local performers to present. The project has caused lots of debate, and we hope the book represents those conflicting points of view.

- Althea Thauberger's photographs show to Jan. 24 at Toronto's Susan Hobbs Gallery. For more information, visit susanhobbs.com.