party *without* party

Emma Bugden interviews Bruce Barber on the occasion of his exhibition 'party *without* party' at Rm103, 8–17 June 2006

Emma Bugden

In recent years theres been an increasing interest in a historicisation of local post-object practice from the 70s and early 80s—in terms of academic re-readings, but also a younger generation of artists taking on and re-interpreting works from that era. How is it to come back to New Zealand and see this renewed interest?

Bruce Barber

An interest in the work of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly fluxus, pop, minimal and conceptual art has been ongoing for sometime now, some of it reconstituting history that had been left out of previous historiography. I'm thinking here of the of the important work being undertaken on the lettrists, international situationists, fluxus and arte povera for example, which was in danger of disappearing from the art historical register. I saw the 'Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-1980s' exhibition in New York (Queens Museum) several years ago and was impressed with the historical revisionism that was attempted by the curators which enabled some countries (their artists and work) that had been previously overlooked to be recognised as part of the history.

Some of the new historicizing is plainly a remarketing strategy on the behalf of some artists, critics and galleries, akin to the recycling of the fashion industry which as you know dusts off designs every few years to revitalize the market. 'Shoulders are back', 'Pink is the new black!' etc. I am happy to see some of the post-object and performance work from the 1970s given another airing and it's important that younger artists can perhaps learn from the activities that were taking place in various cities in New Zealand twenty or thirty years ago. Some work can effectively be reproduced for both educative and critical review. For example when I was teaching performance classes in the 1980s (at Banff and NSCAD) I would assign reconstructions of futurist *sintesi* (short theatrical plays) as well as fluxus events. An intermedia class that I team taught during the early 1980s with Krzysztof Wodizcko consisted of a reconstruction of a futurist evening. We reproduced six futurist plays and reconstructed a futurist orchestra complete with various *intonarumori* (noise intoners). On another occasion, with the assistance of Rose Adams, a graduate student with a theatre degree, I directed a reproduction of Cocteau's *Wedding on the Eiffel Tower*, a famous surrealist play. But this form of theatrical reproduction is a little different from, for example, Gilbert and George

reproducing their iconic *Underneath the Arches* performance (which they have done) or Chris Burden's *Shoot*.

> I like the idea of restaging futurist and fluxus events for 'educational' purposes, in which case it takes on a functional purpose. Although I must say when I was at art school I redid several Andrew Drummond performances from the early 1980s, because I wanted to see how they worked. It took me a while to figure out that it could be seen as an invasive thing to do—certainly he never seemed in the least bit thrilled by the homage.
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> Recently I went to the Jim Allen re-presentation of his performance 'Poetry for Chainsaws' at Michael Lett. After thirty years it was a good work to reproduce, not only because it had never been performed in New Zealand before but also because a description of the work sounds spectacular and showy, yet the experience of viewing was intense and rather private. Are you interested in seeing your earlier works re-performed—and what happens in that process?

Some of my early performances are reproducible but as they are so context dependent they would become different works. Take *Kiss* (1972), for example, in which I was photographed kissing the lips of a large billboard reproduction of Sophia Loren being surveyed by Peter O'Toole (as Don Quixote) appearing that year in the film *Man of La Mancha* (1972), this was then projected with a tape of a woman (my wife Pauline) reading a section on women and property from Mary Douglas's book *Purity and Danger.*


Bruce Barber, *Kiss*, stills from audiovisual installation, 1972. Photos by Colin McLaren

In a way this work exists already continuously in daily life. Think of men or women kissing photographs or paintings of loved ones who are often temporarily absent or dead. But

Kiss is so context dependent that a contemporary reproduction would either be another work altogether or a quotation (critical reinterpretation/revision) of the original, which, in effect, was also mine—of Rodin, Brancusi, Picasso—and the host of other artists captured by the Pygmalion effect.

The reproduction of *Bucket Action* (1973) or any of my other early New Zealand performances would also not really make sense because they were so time and context dependent for their production. They do have scripts in a sense and although *Bucket Action* was performed several times by me, the first performance at Keri Keri remained the major experience because it was new and an extraordinary *erlebnis* event for me. Some of my other early performances could and perhaps should be reconstructed: for example the Arbor Day-based *Simultaneous planting of three trees in separate locations* (1973). But again, perhaps this is also being undertaken every Arbor Day but not choreographed in quite the same manner with respect to the choice of species, site and timing of the event.
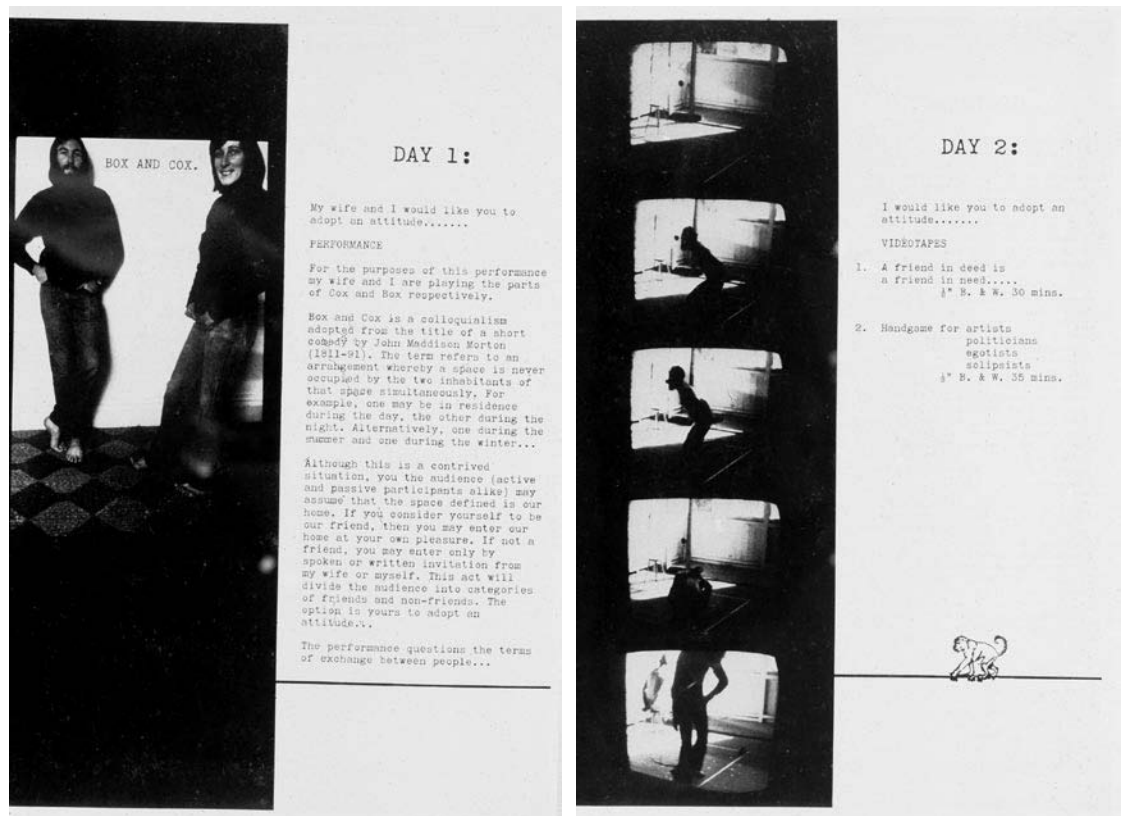
Bruce Barber, *A friend in deed is a friend in need*, 1974

A friend in deed is a friend in need (1974) could be possibly be reproduced although I don't know who would want to be naked, blindfolded, 'handcuffed' and be forced to bob for

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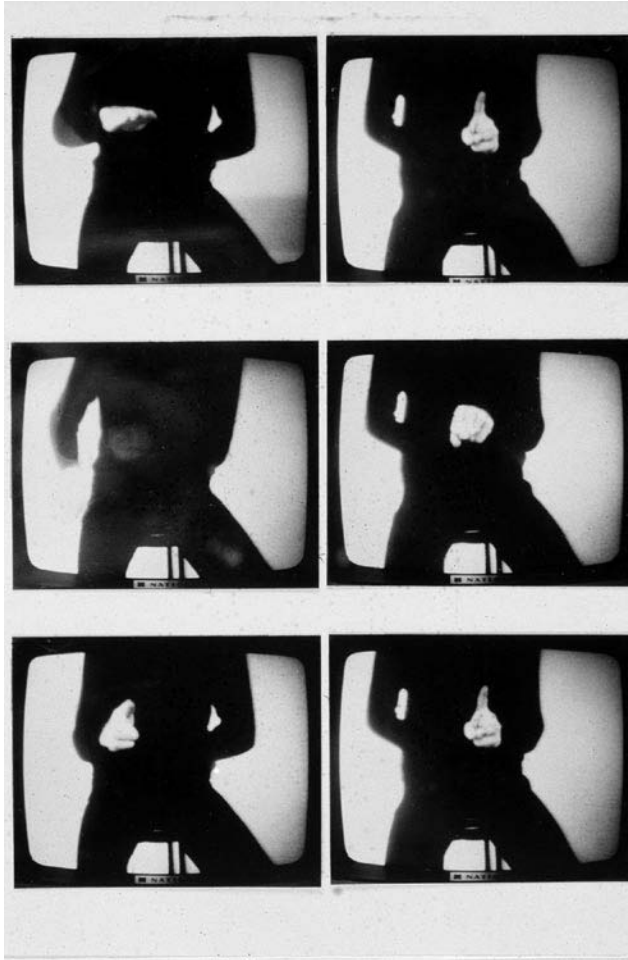
Bruce Barber, *Handgame for Artists, Polititians, Egotists and Solipsists*, 1974

apples in a bucket/barrel at the sound of a bell. *Handgame for Artists, Politicians, Egotists and Solipsists* (1974) can be set up and reproduced in any setting where there is a stool and video monitor. *Youth in Asia* (1974) and *Box and Cox* (1974) were performances I undertook with other performers, while *Mount Eden* (1973) and *Whatipu Beach Performances* (1973) are based on the exigencies of performance and therefore repeating them would contradict the elements of chance that were so important to the collaborative process. They are also logistically very difficult to reproduce and I'm also concerned that reproducing them now would run the risk of losing the unique characteristics of the performance. I would certainly be unable physically to undertake some of these performances myself again because they were so physically arduous. *Bucket Action* was a near birth experience. I don't think that it is comparable to Alice Cooper or Mick Jagger dusting off and re-performing their 70s work for a younger audience. But after one departs from this world one doesn't know what will happen when history sweeps in, does one? (Laughter).

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Bruce Barber, *Bucket Action*, 1973. Image courtesy of the Auckland Art Gallery

Since leaving New Zealand, your work would, on the surface, seem to have shifted from a process-based practice to a practice which is both more relational and more politicised. Rather than relational, you yourself use the term 'littoral' to describe your work, to locate an in-between space which operates outside conventional contexts of both public and commercial gallery systems. Can you talk a little about this shift in your work?

Yes, this is true, but I maintain that my work has not shifted too far away from my original premises which were articulated in 1974 and published in *New Art: Post-Object Art in New Zealand* (eds. Allen, W.R. and Curnow, W., Auckland: Heinemann, 1975). At that time my work was also somewhat political but perhaps more identified with the three 'A's—activist, antagonist, actionist—in the sense discussed by Renato Poggioli in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

I have a few problems closely identifying with the term 'relational' which I associate with the strategies articulated by Nicholas Bourriard in his book *Relational Aesthetics*. 'Littoral' work is more closely linked to the discussions around communicative and dialogical processes discussed most recently in Grant Kester's excellent book *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Los Angeles: UCLA Press, 2005). Kester identifies my work as 'communicative' in the Habermasian sense.

Habermas distinguishes between strategic, instrumental and communicative actions. The distinction, he says, between actions that are oriented toward success and those toward *understanding* are crucial. As he wrote: 'I speak of communicative actions when social interactions are co-coordinated not through the egocentric calculations of success of every

individual but through co-operative achievements of understanding among participants'. (Habermas in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, eds, J.B. Thompson and D. Held, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1982:264); and elsewhere he writes, 'whereas in strategic actions one actor seeks to influence the behaviour of another by means of the threat of sanctions or the prospect of gratification in order to cause the interaction to continue as the first actor desires, in communicative action one actor seeks rationally to motivate another by relying on the illocutionary binding/bonding effect (*Bindungseffekt*) of the offer contained in the speech act' (Habermas, 1990:58). Habermas is here referring to the speech act theory of J.L. Austin which Derrida, Lyotard, Agamben, and a whole host of other language theorists have also employed.

One important thing to note, however, is that Habermas recognised, at an early stage in the development of his communication theory, the inherent problematic of a communicative action that did not offer the possibility of its own (dialectical) transformation. And although his Frankfurt School inspired system/lifeworld paradigm could adequately describe the instrumental logic behind the progressive development of administrative bureaucratization and the economic forces driving the conflict(s) between the system and the lifeworld, communicative actions, wrongly used, could produce, as Walter Benjamin himself understood, wholly undesirable consequences. If readers are interested in some of my theoretical thinking around these issues they can access some more on these ideas in my essays 'The Art of Giving', 'Littoralist Art and Communicative Action', 'Paragraphs on Littoral Art and 'Sentences on Littoral Art' at www.novelsquat.com.

> Is this distinction you make coming from a sense that Bourriard is talking about work which is dealing with sociability, or as he puts it 'social infra-thinness'—connection and exchange between others—rather than a more politicised approach which sees the artist positioned as a change agent, or moving to achieve a genuine shift in power structures?

In a sense yes, although I am very supportive of much of the work that Bourriard discusses in his book, but I think that his analysis is somewhat limited with respect to both the latent and manifest political efficacy of such work. I will draw your attention to the essay I co-authored with Jeff Dayton-Johnson, an economist now working in Paris which was published in the Parachute magazine special on art and economy in 2001. In this piece titled 'Marking the limit: re-framing a micro-economy for the arts', we discussed three overlapping critical models for examining the art/economy diptych arguing that beyond the consideration of

artistic activity as production and consumption of goods and services in a fundamentally market-oriented economy, there is in another sense a relationship between art/economy which is 'to a high degree, symbolically nuanced'.

In this essay we were not primarily concerned with questions of the 'business' of art, the art market(s), nor with the fascination of some cultural economists with questions like why someone paid $82.5-million (US) for Van Gogh's *Portrait du docteur Gachet;* instead we were influenced at the time by Nicolas Bourriaud, who as you know wrote that the history of art 'peut se lire comme l'histoire des successifs champs relationnels externes'. Inspired by artists including Rirkrit Tiravanija, Félix González-Torres and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Bourriaud suggested that whereas artists once explored the domain of relations between humanity and the divine and subsequently between humanity and the object, 'la pratique artistique se concentre désormais sur la sphère des relations inter-humaines'. Thus, as we endorsed, at least one interesting way of interpreting much recent artistic creation is that it posits new models of sociability. Five years later, with the continuing instability in the world at large, the question is whether this is really enough?

> In 1999 you collaborated with Katherine Grant, a homeless woman, on a project called *SQUAT II*. Katherine was both the subject of the work, and an active collaborator. You once said: 'the interaction between marginal groups, and their integration in such projects can lead to extraordinary results in which artistic, social and environmental objectives overlap'. How do you negotiate the ethics of collaborating with someone so utterly outside (or below) conventional power structures? I keep wondering what it was like for Katherine when the project was over and she went back (presumably) to her old life?

Yes, again, these are good questions and both I and Katherine Grant have responded to these in several contexts since *Squat II* was undertaken in July-August, 1999. Some contextual information that I can provide will be useful. The Banff Centre (Walter Phillips Gallery) version of *Squat* was preceded in March 1999 by a non-virtual Squat installed in the so-called Closet Gallery of the Khyber Centre for the arts here in Halifax. I was approached by Michael Fernandes, a Khyber curator and fellow artist, about whether I was interested in using the so-called Closet Gallery, and after inspecting the space, which is a regular-sized closet with an ongoing exhibition program, I decided to return the closet to its original condition as a closet, and to instead use the vacant room adjacent for an installation.

I placed an advertisement in *The Coast*, the local and widely distributed free newspaper,

with a Squat logo (a squatting gentleman wearing a hat, a cane and eyeglasses on the ground before him) and the following text: 'The Khyber Centre for the Arts is seeking a homeless writer to inhabit a squat for a month and to collaborate with Bruce Barber on the production of a Closet Drama for the Ides of March (March 15). Call or visit the Khyber Centre, Barrington Street, phone, fax, etc'. Handbills containing the same information were distributed and posted throughout the downtown. While I was handing invitations out in the street I met Jon David Welland, an artist and writer as well as a self-described street person and managed schizophrenic.

I knew Jon from many years ago when he took a class I taught at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD). He read the handbill and suggested that although technically he wasn't homeless at the moment, he had been on many occasions previously and considered himself to be 'a person of the street'. I told him that he would be expected to inhabit the squat I had designed for the top floor of the Khyber space. In the space (approximately 10 x 8 feet) I provided a bed, bedding, a fridge, coffeepot, hot plate, tea, coffee, pots and utensils. After the opening, which he attended, he committed himself to living and working in the space for a month. I met with him regularly, discussing his writing and drawings with him at length, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes and occasionally taking him out to lunch or dinner. I also purchased a membership for him at the Khyber Centre for the Arts, so that he could submit work to the members' exhibitions and participate in other events associated with the Centre. On the evening of March 15 we read our respective writings from the squat.

Jon was interviewed by CBC radio and read two of his squat writings on the air and two writers profiled him for their respective newspapers. He is a volunteer with the Nova Scotia Hospital, a psychiatric care facility that he has been associated with for many years; he also uses their outpatient resources to publish a magazine containing his writing and drawing in the company of examples from present and former patients. I still communicate with Jon and see him on occasion. He and his writers group are presently collaborating working with Smriti Mehra one of our media arts graduate students, who is from Bangalore, India.

Jon David Welland, *Squat,* Khyber Centre, Halifax, 1999

Sometime after this first Squat exhibition, I was asked by John Tupper, the Director and Chief Curator of Walter Phillips Gallery, to consider participating with Park Bench, a New York-based public and virtual art group, in the gallery's forthcoming internet video exhibition titled 'Streaming Laboratory'. During the next few weeks I worked on-line with the gallery and web master Pedro Mendes from Winnipeg to create the website for the actual and virtual version of Squat. Pedro and I did some research on the web about other squat sites and then set about linking these to my website. Katharine was contacted by similar methods. I visited homeless shelters in Calgary and deposited handbills around that city and Banff and then met with and discussed the project with several 'homeless', or better, itinerant people. The handbill stated that the Walter Phillips Art Gallery at the Banff Centre was seeking an itinerant or presently homeless writer to occupy a squat (designed by myself) for a period of eight weeks during the summer to communicate with other writers on the internet.

This advertisement had circulated for at least two weeks prior to my arrival and the gallery personnel had set up some interviews with prospective squatters for me during the week prior to the exhibition opening. I was also taken to Calgary and distributed other handbills to homeless people. At one of the Calgary drop-in centers for the homeless we established a time to meet with Katherine Grant whom the coordinators recommended as someone who would both contribute to and benefit from the project.

Katherine, a woman in her late forties or early fifties, lived in an old car and traveled regularly between Alberta and British Columbia to maintain contact with her two sons. She had little formal education and recounted a particularly difficult life history, which I did not feel comfortable discussing with her or representing in this context without her express permission. She disclosed that she was receiving disability payments and rejected the idea of receiving payment for her role as a squatter, as this would have jeopardized her social security payments. She did take the opportunity, however, to receive the hospitality of the Banff residency program—food vouchers, the opportunity to sit in on various workshops, access to exercise facilities—to become in effect (without conventional symbolic capital) just like any of the other artists and writers invited to become part of the Banff residency program.

But instead of occupying one of the special architect-designed studio pods provided in the Centre grounds, Katherine was provided with my designed squat in the gallery. She informed me that she had previously taken one continuing education course in writing (in B.C.) and although she was 'always writing' she had not yet had the opportunity to publish any of her work. During her residency in the squat she managed to publish one piece locally and received invitations to publish others. She began work on her life history. She also learned some aspects of video making and became a popular member of the Centre

community, making friends with everyone she encountered. She personalized the squat space with her stuffed toys and bed quilt. She invited people to sign the walls of the interior of her bedroom, which many did, leaving messages of support and friendship, drawings and poems that were subsequently documented on video. She taught me and hundreds of others about homelessness.

Bruce Barber, *Squat II* installation, Walter Philips Gallery, Banff, 1999

'party *without* party' is the performance project you are showing at Rm103. 'party *without* party' takes as a starting point the character Bartleby from a story by Herman Melville about gaining power through a state of nothingness. (One day, Bartleby, a scrivener for a solicitor, refuses a request to check copies of contracts by politely saying 'I would prefer not to'. He stops working but remains passively in the office. Ultimately the lawyer, not knowing how to deal with Bartleby's complete absence of activity, solves the problem by shifting his office elsewhere leaving Bartleby behind.) The tale of Bartleby charts, as Maurice Blanchot once so beautifully put it; ' a suspension. In that suspension society falls apart completely… history is interrupted'. The text for 'party *without* party' boldly declares 'What if conventional party politics, partisanship left/centre/right divisions were a thing of the past? Now to the Dead Letter Box and the potentialities of a party without party!' Is 'party *without* party' suggesting anarchy as a political strategy? How effective is the art of dropping out?

Ah good, something provocative!! These excellent questions have a short answer and a long one that is at least a paper and perhaps book length which we have no space for in this context. First I would like to affirm that from my perspective this project is not easily framed as anarchic or a form of dropping out. The reference for example to the 'dead letter box' is

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some what arch and Derridean… I like what he says in '*the post card from Socrates to Freud and beyond*': 'What does a post card want to say to you? On what conditions is it possible? Its destination traverses you, you no longer know who you are. At the very instant when from its address it interpellates you, uniquely you, instead of reaching you it divides you or sets you aside, occasionally overlooks you. And you love and you do not love, it makes of you what you wish, it takes you, it leaves you, it gives you'. (Derrida, Jacques*, The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. Translated by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press, 1987).

Bruce Barber, *My Left Is Your Right*, 2005

In Halifax the 'party *without* party' buttons, with white text on a red ground were produced for a local exhibition that coincided with the recent Federal Election In Canada. Many people (including myself) were finding difficulty in navigating the differences between the various political party platforms which in Canada are supposedly cut across the left/right axis from Conservative, Liberal, NDP, Green but which increasingly looked the same. In the New Zealand version the 'party *without* party' buttons that we will be handing out publicly are slightly smaller and have white text on a black ground, which I hope will be more readily identified with the All Blacks and the silver fern!

On my blog site www.partywithoutparty.ca I quote Guy Debord's text from his *Critique of Separation* where he says 'I don't intend to play the same game' to which I add 'in the same way'. For me this is a 'scrivenerian philosophy' par excellence inscribed (pregnant) with potential and (becoming) as discussed at length by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, with whom I studied at the European Graduate School in Switzerland: 'I prefer not [to]…' says Herman Melville's Bartleby the scrivener, three times. You will remember that 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' is also 'A Story of Wall-street'. This famous speech act constitutes the *ur* text 'what if/ever – potentiality' of Agamben's ethics for the contemporary philosopher,

read writer or artist (as) scrivener, the one who, like the party without party member, may engage in 'an experience of the possible as such' (Agamben, Giorgio, edited and translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Stanford University Press, 2000, p249). Blanchot's take on Bartleby is somewhat more negative than that articulated in Agamben in *The Coming Community,* or for that matter Jean-Luc Nancy (*The Inoperative Community*).

The arguments coalesce around the failures of May 68, revolutionary action, and the continuing problems with left/right binaries in political thinking when we are attempting to enhance democracy in a world which is as Agamben (*The State of Exception*), Foucault (*Society must be Defended*) and Hardt and Negri's *Empire* and *Multiplicities* has it… not, I will hasten to add, that I agree with everything they have argued, but their notion that our global society is at war (with itself) has some merit. Alain Badiou, another philosopher with whom I have some affinity, uses set theory to make the point that we should be thinking of multiplicities not singularities in our discussions of sovereignty, rights and freedoms in the contemporary context. I tend to agree, so binaries and right/left oppositions don't make a whole lot of sense when we are attempting to understand hegemony, contingency and universality in a world governed (some would say arbitrarily) by relations of power. This is the short response to your question.

> Well, as Habermas once said 'there is no party in particular that monopolises the abuse of intellectuals and the position of neoconservatism'! But the reference to the All Blacks and the silver fern motif in the New Zealand version of 'party *without* party' suggests that you are at perhaps as suspicious of overt nationalism as you are of the traditional left/right split in party politics?

Thanks Emma, you are a very good reader! My irony obviously was not shining through here but yes I am somewhat suspicious of overt nationalist symbolism, but recognize its importance in both establishing and affirming cultural difference. More on Thursday!

Diddly Squat, Toronto (2002): documentation of
30 hours of community service, scraping gum.
Photographer: Miklos Legrady.

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