

Crash consciousness

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Burned-out SUV an artful reminder of how monster cars intrude on our spaces and psyches

Rating: **NNNNN**

Researchers in England have recently been studying ancient structures that they believe are feedback rooms. These were arranged or carved out specifically to reflect the sound of drums or voices in such a way that the echoing vibrations altered the state of consciousness of those present.

While no such aural experiments were going on at Dundas Square last weekend, there was still a bit of space opened up by *conceptual* feedback.

Feedback is a loop of input and output. The gigantic ads crowding the square have the first part covered, exhorting you to input your cash into status-symbol SUVs. The all too common output of that resource-intensive process is usually missing from the idyllic picture. But members of Montreal artist collective Socially Acceptable Terrorist Acts (Action Terroriste Socialement Acceptable, or ATSA, in French) endeavoured to correct this.

For 72 hours, evening to evening, June 9 to 12, the northwest corner of the city's outdoor ad park was occupied by the charred and crumpled wreck of an SUV.

From its back seat, a television played a staccato-style video manifesto wherein a voice riffed over a rapid montage of car ads, calling for policies that would make extinct all "energivores" like the smoking husk in which it sat.

From a distance, the installation, cryptically entitled *Attack #9*, was simply a disturbing object challenging the square's cheery exhortations to consume, evoking anything from a car wreck to a car bomb.

"That's what's great about it," agrees artist and activist Pierre Allard, who along with partner Annie Roy recovered the wreck from a scrapyards, added some dents, torched it and then began touring with it. "I'd rather people make their own conclusions. People are so used to being told how to perceive things."

The piece is so compelling because of its flexibility. As an immediate symbol of car collisions, oil war and good old material excess, it handily encompasses the universe of the SUV - and fills out the parts of the SUV life-cycle not shown on TV. It's the blackened lungs or yellow teeth on the package of car culture. "In commercials you see things through filters," Allard says. "They give you your emotions. People don't get to see them like this." Unless it's too late.

ATSA's nearby table was stocked with information on pollution and war. But a particularly interesting wrinkle in the project was that, taken off the road and plunked down in the middle of a public square, the SUV was quite obviously in the way. This may have been even more effective in a location where something - anything - would have been happening normally, but ATSA's permit allowed them to set up at Dundas Square undisturbed, drawing attention to how the road hog was also a space hog. So many cubic feet of ugly.

Even if emissions were eliminated, cars would still be on the road. And the road would still be on top of what used to be habitat or could have been a park. We may retrieve our smog-addled voices only to find we don't need them because we're separated from everyone else by glass and steel.

"We'd be so much closer to each other without cars," comments Christopher Smith, a member of the Free Parking

project, which made an appearance, along with a bicycle entourage, at Dundas Square on Sunday.

Decidedly more portable than the ATSA endeavour, Free Parking's project consists of frames made of thick cardboard tubes, duct tape and nylon strapping. Worn on shoulder straps, the frames both enclose and keep visible the wearer's body, whimsically evoking the shape and size of a car.

While ATSA brings out automobility's scary side, Free Parking highlights its outright absurdity. Its minimalist approach recontextualizes cars, daring motorists to find the sight of someone taking up so much space ridiculous or annoying. I coyly points out the double standard with a playful rear licence plate that says simply, "Silly, isn't it?"

Project participants, the original core of which formed in a class on carnivals at the Anarchist University, practise what they preach. When I met up with them earlier in Kensington Market's raucous Bellevue Park, it was clear the assembly process is a far cry from the unhealthy and alienating construction of a real car.

Spectators were encouraged to broach the fourth wall and try the models on. Some liked the novelty of a newfangled pedestrian armour; others hammed it up. When I took it for a spin I couldn't help but get into the role of a caricatured motorist, cursing the fleshy bipeds in the voice I imagined the tycoon from Monopoly would have. Satire feels like the best vehicle for this vehicle.

It certainly gets the attention of the authorities. On a brief ride inside two of the frames, Smith and a friend ended up with \$325 tickets for careless driving, only one step down on the demerit ladder from leaving the scene of an accident. He says they were following all the applicable rules, but, in full parody mode, they followed them as if they were cars. "If we were being careless," wonders Smith, "what was everyone else doing?"

Allard is keenly aware of the backlash against anti-car activists. "It's a smog day, and people who ask SUV drivers to stop idling get attacked," he says. "But in 10 years it's going to be the reverse. People are going to gang up and start smashing SUVs. We want to start changing things before there's violence."

Did anyone react that way to the event? "We had one guy who was pissed off," said Allard. "But not at us. He'd just bought an SUV because he loves nature. He was pissed off because he started to make the connections."

That sentiment may have been shared by a silver SUV sulking behind the T.O. Tix booth. The normally brash vehicle looked almost sheepish, as if the awkward truth of the nearby installation made it uncomfortable. It still looked big, but not so irritating. Instead, it seemed both sad and more than a little funny.

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