

**War annals will pass into night
Ere their story die.**

– Thomas Hardy

KIRTLEY JARVIS'S 45 foot-long work, *No Comment*, is a fitting home-coming for Greg Curnoe: *Life & Stuff*, a retrospective of Curnoe's work drawn from the collections of the Art Gallery of Ontario and of Sheila Curnoe. Those attending the imaginatively installed exhibition in Toronto were invited to comment upon it. The resulting six volumes of visitors' comments became the basis for Jarvis's present work, now being exhibited for the first time. Most of the entries she selected, in each case duplicating the original handwriting, read like graffiti, expressing disapproval. The loving care with

which she reproduces these comments, in all their original coarseness, is rather like that of a mother on a battlefield attending the wounds of her dying son. Curnoe, who had a certain fear of museums as a kind of killing field, would have found in the graffiti less a rejection of his art than a vindication of it. In some strangely accurate way, the comments unconsciously (unthinkingly) reflect his own view of art and the institutions that house it. The viewers that Curnoe had in mind were precisely the viewers who at the Art Gallery of Ontario rejected Curnoe's work as art.

Jarvis's monumental piece, hand-stitched on loose-weave embroidery cotton known as "crash," is comparable in certain conceptual respects to *Homage to the R 34*, Curnoe's mural for the Dorval Airport (included in the London exhibition). This not only binds it to the work of Curnoe, but perpetuates as well as renews the radical roots of the London art scene in the sixties. Crucial to an understanding of this scene are the films of Jack Chambers, a viewing of which took place at Museum London in 2001. Jarvis's *No Comment* provides a framework within which both Curnoe and

Chambers continue to expand rather than be contained. *No Comment* affirms a view of art that transcends the many judgements we make about it.

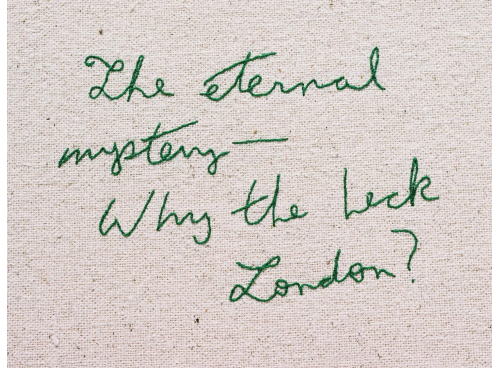
In his film, *R 34*, Chambers mimicked the way in which Curnoe, in his collages, assembled a world out of the refuse that London discarded. Jarvis, assembling the waste material to which many viewers at the AGO reduced Curnoe's work, has in her own unique way done much the same thing. In reconstructing the deconstructed Curnoe, she has constructed a work of her own.

"One of the derivations proposed for the word Canada," Northrop Frye concluded a 1967 series of lectures on Canadian culture, "is a Portuguese phrase meaning 'nobody here.' The etymology of the word Utopia is very similar, and perhaps the real Canada is an ideal with nobody in it. . . . [O]ur identity, like the real identity of all nations, is the one that we have failed to achieve. It is expressed in our culture, but not attained in our life. . . . What there is left of the Canadian nation may well be destroyed by the kind of sectarian bickering which is so much more interesting to many people than genuine human life. . . . [T]he uncreated identity of Canada may be after all not so bad a heritage to take with us."

The kind of identity forged in Kirtley Jarvis's exquisite stitching at once belies and transforms the mindless "bickering" that otherwise remains its content. Jarvis's *No Comment*, like Frye's "nobody here" (Canada's "uncreated identity"), is wonderfully endowed with "genuine human life," not by dismissing the "nobody here," but by transforming it, the void becoming a silent music played upon the simplest of instruments: a needle and thread.

In this simplest of instruments, Jarvis engages the pioneer spirit of her own feminine heritage, present to her and in her as the engagement with wilderness. No less than an axe and a ploughshare, her needle and thread continue to shape it into the human form of itself. "The hills were rubbed bare by wool and hands had touched every inch of them," Chambers wrote of how the Castilian landscape shaped the artist in himself. The fact that modern tools of shaping are reducing wilderness to waste endows Kirtley Jarvis's handwork with an archetypal life. This life, every stitch a brush stroke, binds her not only to Curnoe, but to all those makers of a hand-made culture that is finally, one hopes, the culture that endures.

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The poet Ted Hughes, was asked in an interview if poetry is something that gives hope. He replied: "For myself, I formulated the little notion that art is in general a psychological component of the immune system. As the body tries to heal itself from any stress or shock or infection, the corresponding harmonic, in consciousness, is art. So our constant struggle to pull ourselves together and to deal with difficulty and injury and illness and with threats and fears, manifests itself – at a psychological level – as art. We may not think at the moment that it's the most valuable thing we do, but of any past civilization it's the one thing we want to preserve, because it still operates for us as medicine."

Kirtley Jarvis

Kirtley Jarvis grew up in a small northern Ontario gold mining town and moved to London, Ontario when she was 14. She has been exhibiting award-winning textile work in galleries across Canada since 1977 and has work in private collections and at the London Board of Education, Museum London and Cambridge Galleries. Her early influences include Gertrude Stein and Stevie Smith. Mainly self-taught, she has taken courses at H B Beal Secondary School, the Ontario College of Art and Design and Sheridan School of Design. Kirtley recently celebrated her 25th wedding anniversary with writer Herman Goodden and their three children, Emily, Hugh and Bonnie, the progenitors of some of her best work.

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- Sheila Jarvis for her abiding support;
- Sheila Curnoe for the use of the visitor Comment Books from Greg Curnoe's retrospective at the AGO;
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- Ross Woodman for being speechless and loquacious at just the right moments.

Kirtley Jarvis : No Comment

No Comment (2003), textile, 48 x 1382 cm

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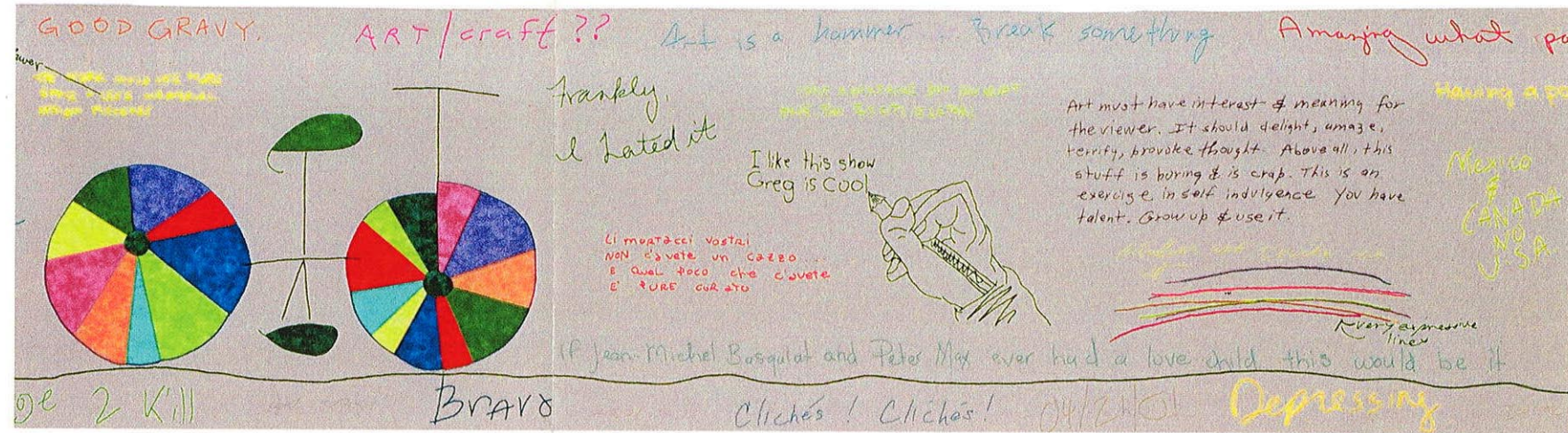
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