Outside The Box
SPASM FESTIVAL TAKES ART TO THE STREETS

by Bart Gazzola

SPASM II Festival Of Offsite Art
II Various Locations
Friday 28 – Sunday 6

This summer, the SPASM Festival of Offsite Art will make its appearance in Saskatoon once again, highlighting the question of "public spaces" through a series of performances, installations, and even interventions into the so-called "public" sphere. Saskatoon will have its public sites tickled, tantalised and perhaps tainted by artists who have no interest in the clean, safe, gallery space.

It's a relevant time for a discussion around "public spaces". Not only has Saskatoon witnessed how fluid the notion of public space can be in the ongoing debate regarding the Gathercole and the South Downtown, a strong argument could be made that "public spaces" are often neither "public" or actual spaces. After all, one must always define which public is being referred to, and who is included or excluded from that group. Also, "spaces" are as much perceived as physical, and concerns of ownership and investment of those spaces are always at play.

Presented through Paved Art + New Media, the Mendel Art Gallery and AKA Gallery, this year's SPASM will not just re-stage the original, but expand upon it. The first SPASM, held in 2002, saw a variety of local artists produce and exhibit multimedia works designed for such diverse spaces as the abandoned storefronts of the bus mall, the ad spaces in city buses, or video screenings on the front of suburban houses (to name a few sites). Some works were staged on specific nights and others were presented for the entire 10 days of the project, the ideas expressed were as diverse as the mediums at play. A few were vandalized, and several were vandalized but often the works were pleasantly "stumbled" across by people who would never consider entering a gallery space.

This time around, SPASM has grown somewhat, adding artists from across Canada and the United States to its yearly lineup. This year's theme is "The Courtyard of Contemporaneity", a loaded phrase that speaks to the life-style of fashion and how our society constructs identity. Fashion has become more than just a set of accoutrements. Fashion choices determine our public face; questions of identity fuel our choices within a world saturated with advertising, shopping malls, big box stores, corporate branding, civic by-laws and technological hype. SPASM aims to be more than a prick on the surface of the City.

OUTSIDE THE BOX

A variety of different artistic styles will be on display at this year's festival. Some of the works making appearances in the city land within the more "traditional" notions of public art: Lois Anderson from Toronto will be installing an interactive installation at Bema Autosport BMW that speaks to notions of the female body and voyeurism, while Hamilton's Simon Frank will be engaging in his unique Concrete Poetry project—chalking text fragments and directional arrows on sidewalks around an urban center, inviting the viewer to engage with his texts, either following his 'plan', or following their own. This work will begin in the downtown, and will be extremely organic in its interventions as the work takes the viewer/participant for a walk.

Other works will challenge the idea of "public" and public space and art: Stéphane Laoun's work, The Wallete, begins with a series of functional wallets complete with money, ID, and miscellaneous personal detritus, left (lost?) at various locales in the City, and each will contain enough information to allow for the finder to locate the fictitious person. Other works are simply fun: Tor Lukasik-Foss (aka Tiny Bill Cody) is a musical performer who will present Yiddish In The Next Big Thing, a series of unlikely concerts performed by this contemporary yodeler [and his alter ego] "tiny bill cody". All of his performances will happen in impromptu places, sometimes on the spur of the moment.

But, as with the last SPASM, there will also be works that scratch at the surface of the City's veneer to reveal more serious issues: Liz Canner, a NYC-based video artist, will be doing a residency at Paved Art + New Media, and will be engaging in SPASM to add another layer to her intercultural media project. Her project will have "high profile" public figures in the Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal community using interactive technology as they explore the perspective and positions of the wearer's first point of view and challenge the boundaries of documentary video making at the same time. The video will be projected onto the outside of the Saskatoon Police Service building in a one-night screening.

The festival has a website (www.spasmpublicart.ca) that will give you more information. As well, CFCR FM 90.5 will be doing constant updates, coverage and other exciting things that coincide with SPASM II: The Courtyard of Contemporaneity. So, come out and attend, observe and engage in the different aspects of SPASM that will be coming to Saskatoon this spring.