

FRATERNITY



In the Main Gallery: Fraternity by Kevin Rodgers 26 June – 24 July, 2010 Reception: Saturday 26 June 2010 @7pm

Modern Fuel Artist Run Centre, 21 Queen St., Kingston ON With the new exhibit *Fraternity* by **Kevin Rodgers** (London, ON) minimalist sculpture becomes a platform for right-wing political pundits. To create the sculptures, Rodgers uses inexpensive materials of composite form – boxes, shelves and stacked sheets – the same materials that are utilized in constructions of short duration such as conventions and weekend political retreats. Rodgers’ interest in collapse is pursued through the construction of these boxes and structures that are cut, stacked, packed and ready for shipment or recycling. The political paraphernalia that litter the exhibition, as Rodgers notes in his artist statement, provide “*specificity, if not explication; context, if not revelation.*” Fraternity draws upon provisional formalism, conservative subcultures and the rhetoric of radical individualism to create an installation that specifically engages with campus politics.

Fraternity Photos

Kevin Rodgers (London, ON) is a 2008 graduate of the master of fine arts program at the University of Guelph, and is currently a doctoral candidate in art and visual culture at the University of Western Ontario—one of the few programs of its kind in Canada. Rodgers has shown in several group exhibitions across Canada, the United States and Belgium, including shows at Galerie Tatjana Pieters, Ghent; Artspeak, Vancouver; Stride Gallery, Calgary; and recently at Goodwater Gallery, Toronto. Images (from left to right): Kevin Rodgers, *Is There a Limit to the Questions?* -- *There is a Limit to the Answers*, 2008. Kevin Rodgers, *Stage 4 (Vote Mike)*, 2010.

Exhibition Essay

“Oh Brother, there is No Brother.” The works of sculpture and wall pieces installed in Kevin Rodgers’ exhibition, *Fraternity*, are meant to evoke the atmosphere of a young men’s student organization/policy think tank that you might find on campus at any number of universities and colleges across Canada or in North America. Rodgers has described his practice as a kind of “stage management” that creates a fictionalized environment that proposes and

establishes a concrete scenario at the same time that it is presented as an aestheticized object for intellectual scrutiny secured through what you might call Brechtian distancing effects.

Surveying the layout of the items on view in *Fraternity*, anyone might wonder about just what sort of activity is being demarcated in this establishment. A number of cues or clues can be taken from the objects at hand: makeshift cabinets, shelving units and other, vaguer appointments assembled from cheap, disposable, and recycled building materials upon which or in which printed matter can be displayed, reviewed, concealed, or stored for future reference. That the content or subject matter of the texts or representational imagery contained by the environment has a preponderance to skew to the right end of the political spectrum is unmistakable. The fact that this work is being presented in Kingston renders it more pointedly hypothetical given that the city's university, Queen's, has had a ban on fraternities and sororities since 1930.

Rodgers' installation would be one of the unrecognized fraternities that may or may not exist in the shadow of Queen's that have been the subject of some debate recently in the student newspaper. Another aspect that makes Rodgers' exhibition timely is the way that it denotes a shift to the right not only within educational mandates, but especially amongst students, who often find themselves at odds with the "liberal" ideologues who teach them.

One sculpture on view that has been literally pulled from the headlines is *The Columnist*, a construction made of wood, vinyl plastic, paint and newsprint that appears hot on the high heels of appearances by the conservative American political commentator Ann Coulter at Canadian universities. When she stopped at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario three months ago, Rodgers was in attendance. It can be surmised that Rodgers' own interests and research shadow the activities of the imagined fraternity, but his own political affiliations are deliberately withheld, just as his constructions are composed to render some information accessible and some barely legible. A *National Post* article on Coulter's Canadian tour lies in plain view, but what is the plastic vinyl stuffed into the stack on which it appears? The newspaper looks as if it was casually tossed on top, but it has been artfully placed in the composition of materials. Can you turn it over to read the other side?

Other works in the exhibition are similarly freighted with meaning. One structure holds a copy of *Foreign Affairs*. The sculpture entitled *Stage 4 (Vote Mike)* has as a constituent part numerous discarded student government election campaign signs. *Fairness for Working Families* incorporates an NDP election campaign sign. *The Tourist (Version Two)* is a compartment built out of a door that has been collapsed and folded like an accordion, its hollow core revealed, housing detritus: the McCain-Palin stickers from the recent American presidential election tucked inside are only partially exposed to sight. The cheap materials used to make the constructions are indexed with those used for structures like a kiosk or an outdoor stage put up temporarily for an event and then taken down. Rodgers' gesture suggests that these same materials have been collapsed, harvested, recycled and transformed for continued use. As provisional as the constructions appear, their composition is precise.

Rodgers is very concerned with what meets the eye. Can you tell that the lipsticked smile that peeks out from the cover of a magazine slotted into *Beyonder* is on a pitbull? The strategies of disclosure in the floor pieces are reinforced by those of the series of wall works that are also in the exhibition. In each a flat metal bar is used to mount a book cover, folded around the bar as well as in on itself. Certain aspects of the book jackets are concealed while others are revealed. Their subject matter is in a similar vein to the other work: *It Didn't Start with Watergate* is an example of one of the folded covers, from the book by the conservative American columnist Victor Lasky, a similarly controversial predecessor to Coulter. In the scenario staked out by the installation, one could suppose that these book jackets are harvested from a university library, since they are conventionally given away by them, and used by the members of the supposed fraternity as signposts. Rodgers' work does raise questions about the behind-closed-doors nature of policy development and decision-making that affects citizens' lives, but it doesn't take a position so much as it plots the field in which positions are taken.

One conclusion that can be drawn from *Fraternity* is that the works within the exhibition both incorporate and act as forms of publicity or public address. The formal, aesthetic qualities of the works vie for as much attention as the cultural artifacts, texts, and news media information smuggled in by them, to the extent that the works need be

considered equally as image, text, and object. A detached Brechtian reception of the spectacle of the exhibition “stage-managed” by Rodgers dovetails nicely with the more recent concept of “reflexive consumerism” furnished by Sven Lütticken. In his book *Secret Publicity* (2006), Lütticken connects the concept with the ability of contemporary art, as a part of the spectacle society, to import anything at all, be it a magazine cover or a bucket of fried chicken, and hold it up for scrutiny. Contemporary art has then the potential to be a critical part of a public sphere that is dominated by the spectacle of the mass media. A text drawing also featured in the exhibition, from the ongoing series *All Talk and No Action*, re-presents misquotes and statements from political figures like Ted Kennedy, taken out of context and re-purposed like the cheap building materials in Rodgers’ other work. Following Lütticken, one could argue that Rodgers’ work in particular, since it deals with it as a theme, offers up a variant or an alternative form of publicity or public-ness. But, again with Lütticken in mind, that doesn’t automatically mean that it is going to be good. Rodgers would probably agree, as he labours to avoid the positive reception of his work if it is going to be simply due to the fact that it conforms with the received ideas of political sympathizers.

Text by Michael Davidge. *Michael Davidge is the Artistic Director of Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre.*