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PO Box 5, Station B,
Toronto, ON, Canada,
M5T 2T2
+1 416 539 9495
cmagazine.com
info@cmagazine.com

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escape Survival in the Diefenbunker fantasies

Between 1959 and 1961, a bunker was constructed in Carp, Ontario, by the government of Canada. After a nuclear attack senior officials would be able to maintain a semblance of government and order within its sheltered confines. The bunker was designed to withstand a massive blast only a mile away and to house 435 people. As the Prime Minister at the time was John Diefenbaker, the site soon became known as the Diefenbunker. The bunker was decommissioned in 1994. Following the decommissioning the municipal government intended to seal the bunker permanently, but a number of local citizens, recognizing the site's national historic significance, undertook the project of converting it to a museum and are now striving to recreate the historical moment of the Cold War for visitors. The museum opened in June 1998.

Later that year, museum directors were approached by the programming committee of Axe Néo-7, an artist-run centre in Hull, Quebec, with a proposal to exhibit contemporary art. The collaboration promised to draw new audiences and open the bunker to a wider array of critical perspectives. The exhibition "Singular Fission" used the bunker as a stage for commentary about Cold War mentalities and reflected on the fantasy of survival implicit in the site.

Sherri Irvin and Cathy Busby make the trek to the Diefenbunker

It's hot on the summer Saturday when we arrive at the pastoral setting of the Diefenbunker, Canada's Cold War Museum, after a forty-minute drive from Ottawa. Set among rolling Ontario hills, the Diefenbunker is the site of "Singular Fission" – an exhibition of contemporary art. By calling ahead, we've already learned that we'll have to participate in the Diefenbunker's standard historical tour in order to see the exhibition. Luckily, we think to pick up copies of the exhibition catalogue at the ticket counter. The others in our tour group seem unaware that an art exhibition is in progress.

Through the Oesophagus

As our tour group proceeds down the long, dank tunnel toward the bunker's main entrance, a strobe light flashes in the distance. The light, it turns out, is part of Denis Farley's work *Last Call* (2000). It silhouettes several life-size cut-outs of men wearing checkerboard white-and-orange uniforms with radiation symbols on the back. The figures, each with a cell phone to its ear, seem to be marching into the bunker to carry out the mission of protecting the government élite. The fact that the bunker is now a museum permits a historical distance between its Cold War function and our present encounter with it. Farley's work, placed at the opening of the tour, immediately combats the presumption that the bunker's ideology has faded into the past.

Leaving Farley's figures behind, we arrive at the heavy entrance door and pass through to the purification chamber, whose function is to admit only the body, minus any clothing, filth or radiation. If the bunker were operating, the guide says, we would now put on our official uniforms, jump-suits rather like those on Farley's figures. We are brought into the fold.

Soon we are in the bunker's hospital, where a light-box created by Adrian Göllner borrows Cold War rhetoric. If we're wondering why the bunker is here, the work provides an answer: "They Walk Among Us: The Communist Threat Is Real." Göllner's light-box series reintroduces language and ideas that were current in the fifties and sixties as a context for evaluating the thought underlying the bunker. The work is integrated so seamlessly with the supply cabinets and narrow hospital beds that some viewers on our tour take it to be an original part of the bunker – perhaps a bit of propaganda to aid the morale of workers who may feel their activity is absurd or pointless.

Shocks and Traumas

Both the artwork and we must reckon with the dominant physicality of the bunker, with its 32,000 tons of concrete and 5,000 tons of steel. The feel is cold and clinical in a mid-sixties way. Fluorescent lights, grey linoleum tile, institutional yellow paint, standard-issue furniture are found throughout. The space is a dream-like labyrinth, monstrous in scale, containing hundreds of rooms within five-foot-thick exterior walls. The complex, stark and disorienting layout is unnerving as we imagine being here for an extended period after a nuclear disaster.

The tour proceeds past the massive pillars that protrude into the bunker's corridors. The restrictions posed by the official route through the building and the guide's factual oral text reinforce our sense of being trapped. For the guide, the art seems neither an unobtrusive presence nor a curiosity, but an embarrassment – silently undermining his expert commentary. When asked, he says it is silly. Because no extra time is allotted for viewing the work, we find ourselves lagging behind or wandering away from the rest of the group. More than once, our behaviour prompts a stern reprimand. Have we ventured into some forbidden zone? Are national security issues at stake? We later learn from museum administrators that the real worry is that someone might fall down the stairs.

During our nearly two hours in the cold, windowless building, with nowhere to sit and nothing to eat or drink, we become increasingly fatigued. Physical strain magnifies our sense of the regimentation and restriction of both the bunker and the tour. The sensory stimulation provided by the artworks provides periodic relief. Jana Sterbak's *Hot Nest* (2000), a tornado-shaped lattice of blazing hot wires, is dangerously inviting as it hangs in a cramped office of government-issue desks and typewriters.

Guy Blackburn's four installations inhabit other small, modular rooms, now stripped of their original furnishings. Blackburn's works echo the obsessive desperation of the bunker's creators; his precarious shelters ultimately function as cages or traps if they function at all. In his work *La Réserve de beauté* (2000), a tower of white bed-frames, each smaller than the next, builds up to a tiny crib near the ceiling. Multicoloured strands of dry hair are spread over the springs of one of these bed-frames. On the bottom-most bunk lies a bulging burlap sack, perhaps large enough to hold an adult human body. A white cloth tube ascends out of the sack and feeds into a ceiling duct in the bunker's

Opening page: Archival photo from construction of bunker (1960), courtesy The Diefenbunker, Canada's Cold War Museum
Opposite page: top to bottom: Denis Farley, *Last Call* (2000), mixed media, dimensions variable / Adrian Göllner, *Spot the Red* (2000), light box, from Loose Lips Series, photo courtesy the artist





ventilation system. A similar tube begins at the brightly illuminated crib atop the stack of bed-frames and disappears into the dark space above the ceiling, where most panels have been removed. A round mirror is positioned to reveal to us that the tiny crib is vacant. Its inhabitant has, perhaps, been vaporized or descended lifelessly into the burlap sack. Or has it been drawn up into the light, achieving salvation?

Escape Fantasies

In the former centre of communications – one of the few places providing a connection to the outside world from within the bunker – two paintings by Wanda Koop fit snugly floor to ceiling. We are distanced from the work by red-and-white-striped danger tape, as well as by a number of rectangular holes in the floor left where machinery has been removed, revealing darkness beneath. In one painting, the heads and shoulders of silhouetted figures rise out of the water. The featureless figures are still, causing hardly a ripple. The second painting depicts a surfacing submarine – a mammoth, sealed structure much like the bunker itself. We recognize that if its inhabitants are alive, they will sooner or later have to come out and face their toxic surround. The other two panels of *Reactor Suite* (1985) have been situated in a much smaller room just down the hall, where they face each other from opposite walls. Koop's paintings offer an antidote to the attempt at super-human survival, even immortality, implied by the bunker's architecture and stated purpose.

Liz Magor's *Sleeper #8* (1999) is situated at another conduit between inside and outside: a sophisticated emergency escape hatch. As the tour guide explains to us, the hatch is operated by a lever that releases a ton of gravel. The falling gravel produces enough suction in the hatch chamber to pull the cover down, creating an opening to the outside. It has been tested, he assures us: the ton of gravel was once released by an accidental pull of the lever. *Sleeper*, a child's doll tightly shrouded in white cloth, absorbs this history as the guide speaks. The doll is wrapped from the forehead down, leaving only its platinum-blond hair exposed. Cocooned, mummy-like, it lies beneath the escape hatch, awaiting transport to the next phase of existence – perhaps deliverance, perhaps a hail-storm of falling gravel. The mechanism of the hatch is still functional, we learn, but the opening above it has been sealed, eliminating any chance of escape.

From the escape hatch we weave our way toward the bunker's inner sanctum. The vault, where half the nation's

gold reserves could have been stored, is the culmination of both paranoia and denial. What good would gold be in a post-nuclear world? Could it buy clean water and fertile soil? Two works created in the early eighties by A&B associés, *Station pilote* and *Transformer Site*, are situated behind the vault's ten-ton steel door. Intricate, small-scale models of massive concrete structures are positioned in front of a large drawing whose pillars and high ceiling strangely echo the structure of the vault where the work is installed. Despite their elaborate architecture, the concrete structures depicted by the models are in a post-disaster state of permanent emptiness; their gradual crumbling has been going on, it seems, for decades or centuries. There is a single hint of hope among the ruins: a tiny wooden palette and a sawhorse, freshly painted in stripes. A pocket of humanity has survived and the excavation has begun. What, we wonder, will be revealed about the civilization, the nation, that built such structures and perished with them?

Overtext

"Singular Fission," like many site-specific exhibitions, uses a politically and ideologically charged location. But the mix of works created in situ and those reprised from earlier production creates additional possibilities for dialogue between the works and this site. The show infuses the Cold War discourse with questions about protection (of whom? from whom?), preservation (of what? how?) and purpose (why?). The works within "Singular Fission" contest the bunker's implicit assumptions, insisting upon the vulnerability of real bodies and the absurdity of such a shelter.

While individual works mount a diverse and often forceful challenge, the real curatorial innovation lies in the dispute between work and site. The tour unapologetically imparts Cold War discourse, the context within which both the bunker and the show become meaningful. The juxtaposition of artwork and tour, neither of which is accessible without the other, provides layered texts that compete for the viewer's attention. As the curators have told us, the work provides an overtext, a layer of meaning superimposed on the bunker itself and the information offered within the tour.

The experience forces the viewer to take stock of architecture, artwork and spoken text as well as the exhibition catalogue and text panels. We struggle to attend to all these elements while adhering to the designated path and allotted time. The activity of the tour guide becomes a per-

Opposite page: Guy Blackburn, *La Réserve de beauté* (2000), mixed media, dimensions variable, photo by Denis Farley

Pages 30–31: Wanda Koop, *Reactor Suite* (1985), acrylic on plywood (Collection of the National Gallery of Canada), 2.4 x 4.9 m, photo by Denis Farley





Opposite page: Jana Sterbak, *Hot Nest* (2000), galvanized aluminum, steel wire, nickel-chrome wire, electric cord and electricity, 102 x 77 cm, photo by François Dufresne, courtesy Axi-Neo 7
 This page: A & B associés – foreground: *Transformer Site* (1982–83), mixed-media maquette, 244 x 244 x 137 cm / On wall: *Station Pilote* (1983–84), charcoal drawing, 244 x 610 cm, photo Denis Farley

formative element of the exhibition. The regimentation and restrictions of a functioning bunker are replayed through his attempts to hold the group together and maintain an unbroken delivery of factual material. According to co-curator Richard Gagnier, the curators didn't foresee all the tensions inherent in the situation. Nonetheless, the tour is an effective, if often uncomfortable, means of bringing the bunker's authoritarian nature to immediate awareness.

One way of coping with an overwhelming experience, of course, is to screen something out. For us, it is the descriptive panels posted near the works that escape full attention – the typeface is too small to read easily and there is too much text to be taken in during the time available. But for visitors who have not come specifically to see the exhibition, it may be the art itself that is screened out. During our tour, many seemed to find the work unapproachable. Despite the curators' intent to include "accessible" works, rich in narrative and sensorial qualities, even the highly sympathetic and culturally aware museum administrators found it difficult to understand and appreciate many pieces without interpretative help.

The struggle to see and understand the work adds yet another dimension to the exhibition. We, along with the rest of the tour group, performed as seekers of knowledge and experience. For the two of us, both interested in and informed about contemporary art, the show offered a striking range of attitudes and encounters, and we openly performed as art appreciators, spending time with and discussing the works. At the same time, we observed that other group members were uncomfortable interacting with the exhibition – or avoided it altogether. Our eyes were opened to how hard it was for a non-art-informed audience to grasp the show.

The exhibition may have been a missed opportunity to communicate to the sort of broad audience the Diefenbunker attracts. It may even have contributed to some people's estrangement from contemporary art. In this, it offers a glimpse of the breach between the general public and the audience that we who work in contemporary art are accustomed to: those who visit artist-run centres and other contemporary art exhibition sites. As we build on the tradition of site-specific exhibitions outside the gallery, we must give more consideration to how work will communicate with the larger audiences it meets there. Merely placing works in the path of our hoped-for audience is not enough. If we don't make further attempts to connect, we risk the alienation of this audience and the withdrawal of their support.

"Singular Fission" is an ambitious collaboration between art and non-art organizations, and a project of remarkable scale for an artist-run centre. Though imperfect, it provides a model for efforts to interweave areas of culture that have remained largely segregated and to open up ideological spaces to a multitude of voices and meanings.

