

## A Car Bomb at Yonge-Dundas Square

Melanie Bennett

*I believe true art offers the greatest reflection the world can have of itself. It is concise and brutally honest.*

—Carly Sorge

Opening in the spring of 2003, Yonge-Dundas Square has become Toronto's Times Square, bombarding pedestrians with flashy LED screens that promote a lifestyle beyond means and boasting TO TIX, a last-minute discount ticket vendor. With attractions such as Toronto Eaton Centre and Hard Rock Café, the intersection of Yonge and Dundas is Toronto's number one visitor destination (see "History"). This location is the ideal setting for a car bomb; at least, that's what Montreal artists and founders of ATSA, Pierre Allard and Annie Roy – with the cooperation of the Theatre Centre, Saw Video and Galerie Saw Gallery – envisioned when they staged a hyper-realistic performance art scene at the square last June.

ATSA (Action terroriste socialement acceptable – Socially Acceptable Terrorist Acts) is a not-for-profit organization that is interested in opening up societal dialogue by unnerving the urban landscape. Their mission is to create interventions that question society's values. Through the symbolism of aesthetics, ATSA takes over a physical space, creating a spectacle that draws the attention of passers-by, taking them out of their ordinary reality and into a hyper-reality that is meant to invoke an emotional response (see "Mandate"). The works seek to create a sense of awareness and responsibility in spectators, encouraging them to reflect and, hopefully, take action in addressing the issue explored in the work. By incorporating "terrorism" – a taboo and prevalent phrase all at once – into their organization's name, Allard and Roy are provoking varying reactions. Whereas a terrorist act reacts to objectionable circumstances through unacceptable violence and mass murder, ATSA uses violent images that reflect the aberrations of the world.

Called *Attack*, the installation at Yonge-Dundas Square is the ninth performance, after effective presentations in

Montréal and Québec. It features a Sport Utility Vehicle that the artists destroy into an explosive wreck. Surrounded by red danger tape, the still fuming, blackened SUV forcefully accuses consumers, the automotive industry and the government. Not only does it heighten the public's awareness of the vicious effects that these gas-guzzling vehicles have on the environment and health but it draws a parallel between the aggressiveness of the automotive industry and the violence of a terrorist attack.

Serving as an audio-visual manifesto, a television playing a DVD with an explosive implication – including the statement, "Because the only useful SUV is a dead SUV" – is integrated into the burnt-out seats of the vehicle. To consumers, the manifesto asks them to reflect upon their overdependence on fossil fuel and on its link to global-warming and the war in Iraq. To the automotive industry, it insists that SUVs cease to be offered as a choice to consumers. It also questions the Canadian government's position, or lack thereof, in allowing these vehicles to be sold when the world is in the middle of an oil shortage and calls upon them to follow through on their commitment to the Kyoto Protocol.

Originally, *Attack* was to be located at the Toronto Dominion Centre, in the financial district, but the final decision to stage it at Yonge-Dundas Square proved to be one of the more powerful aspects of the scene. Not only is the intersection active twenty-four-hours a day, but the square also attracts a wide variety of people – students, shoppers, tourists, street vendors and business persons.

In 1998, the City of Toronto launched a redevelopment campaign in an attempt to make a safer, more vibrant and more competitive downtown. The area of Yonge-Dundas was the first location targeted for improvements, with the intention of "creat[ing] a renewed sense of place, attract[ing] additional retail and entertainment development to the area and ... improv[ing] its appearance and safety" ("History"). The city's success in meeting its objective of creating a "sense of place" is doubtful. The square has become the focal point of retail/commercial and condominium development projects. Meant to be "a calm, quiet space amid the bustling downtown core," the geometric shapes and lines of the minimal design seem strangely unwelcoming and barren ("Design"). Devoid of greenery, the space's only adornments are large granite slabs, a sculptural canopy and two rows of twenty fountains. The "calm, quiet" square is also constructed on top of an underground parking facility, which houses many a luxury SUV.

In his book *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place and Documentation*, Nick Kaye says that a site-specific work may "articulate and define itself through properties, qualities or meanings produced in specific relationships between an 'object' or 'event' and a position it occupies" (1). In *Attack*, the "object" – the destroyed SUV – and the "event" – the artists' interactions with the spectators, the display of brochures and

the looped multi-media presentation – are in direct opposition to the space that the work occupies. Situated at Yonge-Dundas Square, the installation works “against the assumptions and stabilities of site and location” (3). For example, the work impedes the glamorous display of consumerism – a representation that normally goes unquestioned in that space – and exposes its artifice.

One of the more compelling features of a work like *Attack* is its liveness. In his article on Live Art’s happening, Andrew Quick says that being live displaces “the constellations that bind knowledge and representation together to fashion the narratives and structures that presume to describe and organize phenomena into concrete formations” (93). The “live” not only makes its place in space and time but creates “a concrete situation (a place) in which it can be encountered” (93). *Attack* removes the “pre-existing referential frameworks,” which results in making “place less” (93). It shows that the plan of establishing Yonge-Dundas Square as a “calm, quiet space,” centring around retail and entertainment development, in order to improve the appearance and safety of the downtown is in actuality, a perverse ideal. The “live” event of *Attack* disrupts the promotion of a self-indulgent lifestyle, free of responsibility, and implicates consumers in a direct and accusing manner.

Martin Heidegger equates “place” with the violent act of clearing land and settling and Jean-François Lyotard similarly observes that there is a cruelty and destructive force within domestic space. Lyotard believes that the violence of a place’s creation “continues to haunt those who inhabit it” (qtd. in Quick 98). In the past, the southeast corner of Yonge and Dundas was known for its rundown discount clothing stores, with large signs promoting “Jeans under \$20.” Currently, the standard of living in Toronto is more extravagant – the rundown buildings have been demolished and replaced with granite and the advertisement is for more pricey brands. The violent image of *Attack* in this pristine square demonstrates the largely unrecognized reality that these higher-priced objects not only fail to deliver on their promise but are detrimental to our existence.

When I visited *Attack*, it was the weekend, and southwestern Ontario was in the middle of one of the summer’s severe heat waves. The normally fast-

paced corner seemed a little lethargic – people walked more sluggishly and lingered longer – and the square was crowded with people wanting to take a break from the heat. Many lounged on the granite benches listening to a live Cuban band performing the sizzling mood of summer, and children ran through the rows of fountains shooting water. Yonge Street was congested, with bumper-to-bumper traffic that didn’t help to alleviate the impenetrable smog.

Coincidentally, in the background of the *Attack* scene, there was a Ford billboard marketing the Escape hybrid, a more fuel-efficient, environmentally friendly SUV. The advertisement featured the vehicle amid lush greenery – the only sign of green to be found in this granite playground – giving a false impression that the company is committed to building cleaner automobiles. What it failed to reveal is that the hybrid costs the consumer approximately \$10,000 more than the gasoline-fuelled Escape. The destroyed, blackened SUV juxtaposed with the extravagant Escape image – an illusion of promise – reminded consumers that there is no “escaping” the fact that car companies like Ford continue to make vehicles that surpass reasonable limits for pollution emission, mainly because these vehicles sell for a much higher price than a sedan.

British novelist J.G. Ballard has been quoted as saying that “many of the great cultural shifts that prepare the way for political change are largely aesthetic.” There’s always a question of whether art will have any social impact on its spectators. ATSA believes that it can and continues to examine familiar western philosophies through a particular conceptual lens, in the process, forcing spectators to re-evaluate their personal responses. The advantage of a work like *Attack* in comparison



Photo by David Pijuan-Nomura, with special thanks to Franco Boni and the Theatre Centre



ASTA Photo courtesy of the Theatre Centre

to a performance set in a theatre is that it is placed in a site that serves as a counter-argument to the installation. The piece not only educates its spectators – most of whom don't frequent the theatre – on the unreflecting lives, including our own, that we endanger through our careless consumption of the planet's resources, but its placement at Yonge-Dundas Square deconstructs the hegemony of a culture seeking emotional fulfilment from objects.

## Works Cited

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