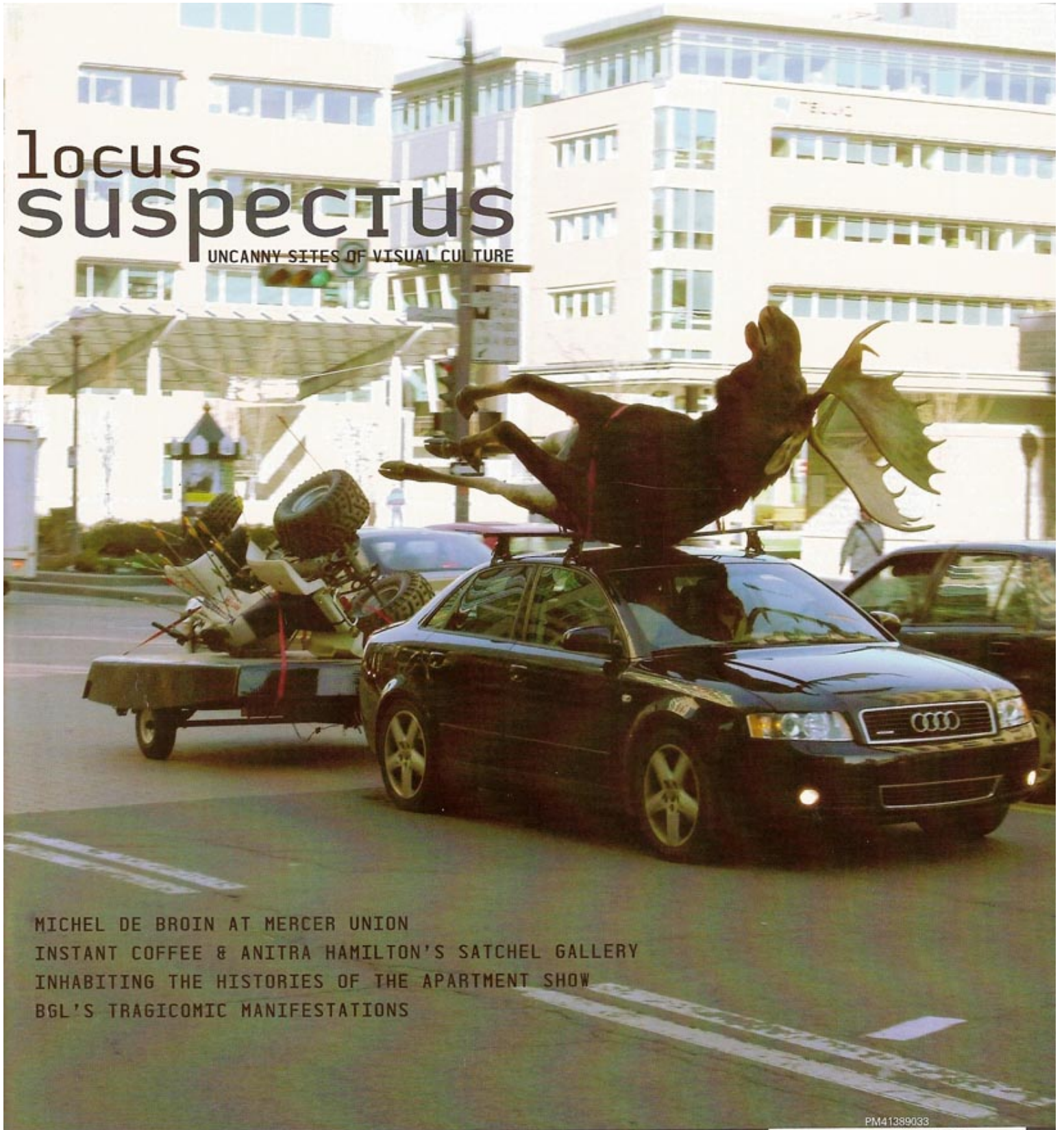


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UNCANNY SITES OF VISUAL CULTURE



MICHEL DE BROIN AT MERCER UNION  
INSTANT COFFEE & ANITRA HAMILTON'S SACHEL GALLERY  
INHABITING THE HISTORIES OF THE APARTMENT SHOW  
BGL'S TRAGICOMIC MANIFESTATIONS

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**SITE SUBCONSCIOUS:  
AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINE KIROUAC**  
By Steven Matijcio

**PLUG IN ICA** curator Steven Matijcio recently sat down with Winnipeg-based artist Christine Kirouac to discuss *Sentry*, a video work projected upon the Canada Malting Company Building on Toronto's waterfront. This was Kirouac's first undertaking of this scale, projected upon 150-foot grain silos in a continuous loop over the course of three evenings in the spring of 2007. It was commissioned by the Ireland Park Foundation to launch a memorial park commemorating the 160th anniversary of the arrival of the Irish famine ships on the shores of Toronto. *Sentry* is a silent, non-linear video loop combining cinematic and documentary techniques with its unique screening location to create a beacon-like work entwining subject matter and site. Comprised of four sections, it begins with the dramatic emigration of the Irish famine survivors across the Atlantic. Plight travels across their

faces as the rays of a distant lighthouse define human shapes amidst deep, thick shadow. Shifting to the present, cavernous interior views of the empty Malting Company grain elevators provide a powerful bridge between periods of history and economy. Time and narrative collapse upon one another in this space, where the silos inhabit both past and present. These silos stand like monoliths, and their silent lament trickles through the fingers of an anonymous pair of hands as they cradle grain and unearth potatoes. In the last sequence, elegy and resilience meet again in a desolate winter landscape linked to a series of silhouettes of 1847 famine ship descendants presently living in Toronto—where the themes of the video converge with their site of projection to acknowledge the past, live the present, and look to the future.

immigrant. However, when dealing with subject matter that is culturally sensitive, it can be a challenge not to portray that experience using tropes of hyper-sentimentality. To reflect people rather than roles, I abstracted events and emotions. The faces looking out over a treacherous sea at the start of the video represent the descendants contemplating an uncertain future. The final sequence in the video is a series of black and white Victorian style silhouettes of four famine ship descendants that now

viewing the DVD on a computer—context is everything. As an artist, my job was to meld the requirements of the commission with my vision as a Canadian/Irish Métis contemporary media artist. Personally, I felt the work was extremely successful in its reconciliation of history, architecture, and place—which all came together during the screening. The scale of the video, and the resolution of its many technical challenges, also increased my belief in the possibility of projects outside the institution.

“Even in the moments when no one was around, the imagery created a powerful (yet fragile) meaning in the realization that the moment was innately human in its inevitable transience.”

reside in Toronto. I wanted the themes of the video to converge with their site of projection in a way that entwined the past, those living in the present, and a vision of the future—symbolized by the woman’s hands digging in the snow for potatoes; that life lies under death. As to the question of “success,” it can be difficult for a public art experience to please all. Ironically, there were those at the Ireland Park Foundation who initially supported the idea of the video, but subsequently withdrew their support after the video was completed, before seeing it in the context of the site, which in the end is a completely different experience than

**SM:** The commission of this work involved a number of constituents and their sometimes-contradictory interests. As such, it reflects the conflicted nature of many public commissions, which must please an eclectic public for fear of potential removal. What challenges did you face in this context, and how did you balance the needs of a number of different audiences?

**CK:** Public art is a series of negotiations that will always fall short of pleasing everyone involved. A primary problem is that those holding the funding can sometimes underestimate the intelligence (or patience) of the general public. Moreover, boards and corporations are often not cognizant

of the power art can have, so a lot of energy is spent *convincing*, as opposed to collaborating. In this context, there were those that believed in the significance of this video, and the impact it would have on the Park as a whole, who faced firm opposition. I felt very small as an independent artist in this instance and successfully raised funds on my own from resources that support public art interventions.

**SM:** This project is built upon the stories embedded in both the bricks of the Canada Maltng Company and the bloodlines of the Irish famine descendants. What new stories accumulated in the making of the project, and its presentation in a highly trafficked area of downtown Toronto? Can a public setting harm the reading of a video work?

**CK:** I think it can go either way. Two men approached me during one of the evenings of the projection. One was highly aggressive and asked if I had permission to do this projection. Before I could explain the project, he said he was “sick of people illegally advertising by performing guerrilla projections to sell products, like NIKE had done recently all over Toronto’s downtown.” I was taken aback, but intrigued by a member of the public becoming an active receiver of what enters his/her field of vision—especially in an age when the lines between public art and advertising and the bombardment of other images and messages are more blurred than ever. He felt frustrated with the lack of control the public has in decisions regarding public imagery. Once he took a moment to listen to the purpose for the work, he calmed himself, sat on the park bench across the water and took it in for over half an hour. Is

Facing page:  
CHRISTINE KIROUAC, *Sentry*. Digital video still.  
Courtesy of the artist.