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The Mise-en-scène of a Decade: Visualizing the 70s

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ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE (1970S) COMMUNE: NOTES TOWARDS AN OLD/NEW ONTOLOGY OF STUDENTS

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN FRASER MCCALLUM AND ANDREW PENDAKIS

Fraser McCallum is a Canadian artist whose work on Rochdale College, an experimental commune that was set up in Toronto between 1968 and 1975, explores the relationship between politics and historical memory. What follows is a conversation with Fraser about his piece *Come Live With Us* (2016) and about the political and aesthetic resonances of the commune today.

AP: Fraser, could you tell us briefly about the history of Rochdale College. What was it? How long did it exist for?

FM: Rochdale College was a free school and student co-operative housed inside an 18-storey apartment building in Toronto, operating from 1968 to 1975. It was originally conceived as a student housing co-op to serve the University of Toronto but evolved into its own entity not long after planning began. The project was initiated by Campus Co-op, which ran many shared houses in the area and sought to expand its operations. Empowered by new legislation permitting the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to loan to co-operatives, Campus Co-op ultimately opened Rochdale on a vacant lot at the north end of the

University of Toronto campus. Due to zoning restrictions, which called for 7-to-1 floorplan density relative to the lot size, the Co-op ended up building a high-rise designed to house 850 people—much larger than any of its existing properties. At its height, more than double the resident capacity lived in the building. Lifestyles denoted by the apartment units varied widely, from conventional double rooms to entire floors arranged as communes. The ground level and second floor were used for various self-organized facilities, including television, radio, publishing, filmmaking, a library, and a restaurant.

The educational ideals of the College were primarily developed by U of T graduate students and sessional instructors. They sought to reimagine postsecondary education based on principles of freedom—where learning would be pursued for its own sake, beyond its instrumental role in preparing students for the job market. These educational ideals were carried out very loosely: Rochdale was non-accredited and ran courses on the basis of students' interests. There was little vetting or oversight in shaping the course offerings.

The College ultimately closed due to its inability to pay its mortgage, but it was a shell of its most vibrant self for several years before its closure. Not long after opening, runaway youth from the nearby Yorkville neighbourhood began to live in College common rooms, broom closets, and so on; they were tolerated by a sufficient majority of Rochdale's permissive residents. For similar reasons, high-volume drug dealers also moved in, cashing in on the inability of the police to govern the building. The College was frowned-upon in the broader local and national public, fueled by media portrayals of its greatest excesses of drug use, sex, alternative lifestyles, and derelict living conditions. This broader disgust set the stage for Rochdale's closure long before it actually happened, regardless of what was going on inside. Local politicians' patriarchal views of the counterculture couldn't withstand the lawlessness and immorality they associated with Rochdale in such a highly visible, downtown locale.

AP: How did your interest in Rochdale develop? How or where did you come across it?

FM: I first heard of it through friends whose parents had passed through there, which is quite common in Toronto. I then watched *Dream Tower*, which emphasized just how interesting and unique Rochdale was.¹ Much later, as a graduate student at the University of Toronto, I decided to undertake this project as a way to reflect more broadly on the contemporary education system and the ontology of studenthood. Since U of T holds the Rochdale archive, I felt the sense of two immensely different views of education throughout the process. As one would expect, the University was quite antagonistic toward Rochdale during its time. Robarts Library, a centrepiece of the campus, is likewise a Brutalist high-rise, and is directly within

sight of the former Rochdale building (which still stands, now remodeled for use as community housing). In a very tangible way, these two buildings with wildly different histories are in architectural dialogue with one another—and with Robarts holding the Rochdale archive, the former holds the material history of the latter.

The architecture of Rochdale College became a crucial detail to consider. It's a very unremarkable building, indistinguishable from the apartment towers that were being built throughout the region at the time. The literature on Rochdale, however, shows that the social life of the building vastly exceeded the constraints of its architecture, and residents creatively misused the building to their advantage. For example: it was made almost impenetrable to the police. Residents would use fire alarms to signal police raids, block stairwells, and remove room numbers. This fortress-like quality was crucial to the survival of the College in its later years. While apartment towers from this period are often criticized for alienating and atomizing their residents, the College residents inverted these architectural features for a much different arrangement of social relations.



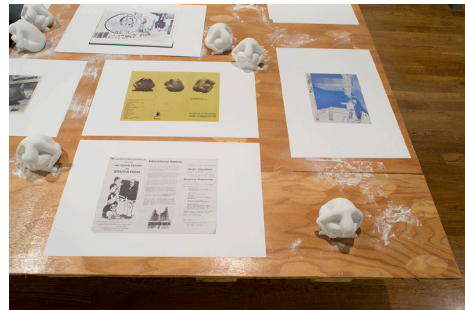
View of former Rochdale site at 341 Bloor Street West, from Robarts Library

AP: Could you describe the Rochdale installation for those who weren't able to visit it or access the video?

FM: The piece, *Come Live with Us*, consists of a 20-minute experimental documentary, a risograph booklet with a text I wrote, and an installation with a table and some prints. Objects in the installation appear in the video, and vice-versa. A major facet of the work involved remaking objects from Rochdale's archives using the high-tech tools of the contemporary university: 3D printing and laser cutting. I remade countercultural drawings from the archive as laser-cut stencils, which are spray-painted on gallery walls. I 3D-scanned and printed a miniaturized replica of *The Unknown Student*, the lone remaining trace of the College—a public sculpture which still exists outside the building. The installation is anchored by a large studio table, on which sit the sculptures and stencils, as well as reproductions of Rochdale College documents as loose prints. There's also excess 3D-printing dust on the table because the process of extracting a print involves vacuuming it out of a tray full of loose dust—like an archaeological dig. The studio table, replete with dust and loose prints, suggests an active and mutable approach toward this history.



The video looks closely at my mediated relationship to Rochdale. I had former residents read key texts from the College history for my camera: these give a sense of its aspirations, achievements, and public backlash.



CLWU Installation view

Photographs, documents, and archival audio appear throughout. I shot video at the former College site and in the archives at the University of Toronto to examine the architectural relationships mentioned above. Finally, I intersperse long shots, which depict the processes of remaking the objects in the installation: machines reproducing objects that were once handmade or made from technologies that are now obsolete.

AP: In your film about Rochdale we get a sense of a distinctly different way of imagining domestic space. Home is not simply a place to eat, rest and, sleep or a space of quiet familial reproduction, but an integrated production unit—a site for communal invention where things are constantly being designed, built, and transmitted. From the beginning we're encouraged to look closely at shots of conspicuously displayed communal equipment: in-house radio and video technologies and print materials, as well as what appear to be machines for the weaving of textiles and other primitive industrial processes. In this sense, Rochdale is a kind of anti-suburb. Where the suburban home is for the most part isolated, functionally fixed, and experienced as a site of passive leisure and consumption, Rochdale is shown to be emphatically multi-modal, intrinsically socialized, and politically productive. Why did you want to emphasize these material, quotidian aspects of Rochdale (as opposed, say, to the interpersonal or political moments that would define a different kind of history of the institution)? What might we see in these antiquated communications technologies beyond old age and redundancy? With the shift from analog to digital production, the potential reach of a text or image has been dramatically increased even as the conditions of production themselves have been privatized and

de-skilled. What is it, then, about our moment which makes these images of socialized, productive life particularly enticing? In a moment in which anything anywhere can be instantly shared—a text, a thought—what might be added to the atomized cycle of digital production and consumption by genuinely socialized life?

FM: I contend that residents of Rochdale College sought to make a more livable world in a myriad of ways, beginning with quotidian life at home. Beyond education alone, there were experiments with childcare, communal living, and horizontal politics. But my emphasis on the material culture lies in the fact that this is where their aspirations and social relations were actualized in a way that is well-documented. For instance, there is a mountain of self-published print material from Rochdale: near-daily newspapers for eight years, memos, committee meetings, protest pamphlets, and ephemera of all kinds. Co-creating printed matter, radio, television, pottery, sculpture, and so on served to produce and bind the Rochdale community. It offered a public forum beyond one's immediate peers (it's important to remember there were usually upward of 2000 people in the building), a documented way to express political consensus or dissent, identities, affects, and so on. The art historian Robin Simpson describes some Rochdale media productions using the discourse of "counterpublics," which I think is apt: it captures the broad oppositional scope of the identities forged there.²

Rochdale's textual and material culture offers a clear picture of its residents' ideals. These ideals were paramount for me, rather than ascriptions of failure or success, because they express a genuine desire to reform the education system and to restructure everyday life. Residents



express their aspirations with a healthy amount of indeterminacy and uncertainty. Focusing on the primary texts offered a different entry point than my interviews with former residents, since the latter were speaking from a retrospective position, which was further clouded by the media campaign to demonize Rochdale.

With regards to the end of the question, I think in a very straightforward way these images are imaginative: they depict a set of social relations that existed with relative autonomy from the frowning public for quite a long time. They are hard to imagine given the conditions of possibility that exist today. To look at these images now is to look not only at documents of alternative ways of living, but also to look back—and through—this era, which was itself envisioning a future much different from what came to be.

AP: Contemporary student culture shows little interest in the commune as a form of life, despite the fact that students continue to report high rates of loneliness, anxiety, and depression and despite the fact that high rents and stagnant wages make collective living relevant even as a means to mere economic survival. There's a very real way in which the commune is conspicuously missing from the contemporary cultural landscape. In your installation you

chose to stencil images from the Rochdale archive onto the wall of the gallery. In addition to this you spread its prints and pamphlets out onto a bare wooden table. You chose to leave some kind of dust too on the table in the space between these prints. Is there not in all of this a real desire for the material traces of Rochdale, an interesting political nostalgia, one that goes far beyond the ostensibly disinterested curiosity of the historian? What political or aesthetic value do you continue to find in the commune or broadly in the kinds of utopian social experimentation we saw across the late 1960s and early 1970s?

FM: Nostalgia was top-of-mind for me throughout the project, as there is so much contemporary currency placed in this historical moment and it is often quite selective. I am perhaps guilty of this myself, as I don't overtly critique the naïve politics on gender, sexuality, and race that cloud Rochdale's largely white, heterosexual, middle-class resident body.

My approach was to remake archival material using highly mediated, technological means—media that are thoroughly enmeshed in the contemporary university. With this approach, I hope to present the material in a way that foregrounds my alienation from it but assert that it is worth looking closely at nonetheless. Of course, nostalgia exists when looking at historical material of this nature no matter how it is presented, but I'm not averse to affective responses, so long as they don't stick to conventionally defined nostalgia alone.

With that in mind, I *do* dwell on Rochdale's notions of freedom, self-determination, and mutual aid, which resonate with me personally and politically and which I believe to be worth re-examining. These are especially crucial to

contemporary student life, which is characterized by debt, competition, and alienation. As I was a graduate student at the time, I was thinking about an ontology of studenthood—what does it actually mean to be a student? For most people, studenthood is characterized as a phase of maturation and knowledge-acquisition, one then followed by a sharp (and irreversible) transition to adulthood. The social experiments of the 1960s and 1970s, like Rochdale, seem to instead *permanently inhabit studenthood*, foregrounding transition, study, and indeterminacy as a way of being political. This refusal to “grow up” also represents a refusal to cohere with normative ideas about respectability, maturity, etc.

These ideas about studenthood are rooted in the dominant critique of the university at that time, which characterized the latter as a “knowledge factory”—a place where cognitive capitalism is reproduced through the making of compliant and myopic workers.³ At Rochdale, students identified this turn in higher education as a foreclosure of their futures. In pamphlets and self-published newspapers, they express desires to learn and experiment without the narrow frame of goal- and career-oriented coursework. The point on “knowledge factories” is crucial to the formation of their ideas about studenthood: in lieu of being melded, normatively socialized, and disciplined, they seek to remain open to possibilities and ways of knowing that escape the logic of the factory.

AP: This question has to do with what we see as a core line of inquiry at work in Come Live With Us, one directed at the relationship between representation and history. It is not that your piece seems particularly interested in representation as such—this was really a theoretical fetish of 1990s deconstructionist art

practice and criticism, one that has mostly exhausted itself. Rather, its focus is more specific and has to do with the peculiar difficulties of visualizing the political. How does one represent or stage a political process that has vanished, a process that was at the same instant a mere sequence in a much larger conjuncture that has itself disappeared? To narrate political events retrospectively has always been a tricky process, in part because the tendency of the evental is to create something new at the outer edges of an existing situation. As Badiou frequently reminds us, events are inherently unpredictable. They happen against the odds of everything we think we know about a state of affairs. But we are dealing with more than the trickiness of narrating events as such here. Instead, the problem has to do with a paradigmatic shift in the way time presents itself. What has vanished is the entire universe of communism—the whole ramifying world of left experimentation that constituted so much of what took place world-historically between 1917 and 1980 (the latter date, when both Reagan and Thatcher were elected, is as good as any to name the end of the era which preceded it). Included in this notion of a communist universe—we could call it a left universe or a socialist universe too—would, of course, be the actually existing state socialisms, but also left unionism, radical student movements, guerilla groups, communes, etc. However specific or singular the Rochdale experiment was it can't really be understood apart from the now-vanished atmosphere of this universe.

How, then, does one represent an experiment like Rochdale, one that was, in its time, so intensely and confidently here and now? This was a confidence, a joie de vivre, that was reliant in part on a broad sense, no longer present on the left, that in the long run, in the end,

we will win. I don't mean to use this phrase flip-pantly: there's a real sense among students in the late sixties and early seventies and among organized militants and movements that the forces of reaction and conservatism are in retreat and that capitalism as a system is a visitor from the past (and not the future). It is not an exaggeration to say that given our own political conjuncture, the work of re-staging such an experiment—giving life to its agents' expectations and actions, immanently understanding their desires—requires the same kind of archeological leap required by anthropologists working on groups radically removed from themselves in time and space. In other words, we're not sure that returning to the political universe of the early 1970s is all that different from having to imaginatively reconstruct the life-world of the Etruscans! At least from my view this is how dramatic the conjunctural shift has been since the rupture introduced into history by Reagan and Thatcher. It is as if neoliberalism were a kind of garishly mirrored door: once closed it shuts off the time/space beyond it in a new way, making attempts to film or write across the threshold extremely difficult. So your film sets itself this extremely interesting (and difficult) task, that of filming through a mirrored door and onto a world that has vanished. You seem to be explicitly trying to thematize this by focusing very closely on the material culture of the signs and traces left by Rochdale (for example, with shots of hands moving through archives, of period documents, and of its architectural remainders). You also choose to access the subjects of Rochdale not through direct interviews in which they are asked to reflect spontaneously on the past, but by having them read period documents that were produced about or by Rochdale. There's a very explicit foregrounding

of historical layers at work in all of this. What's going on here?

FM: I fully agree with your contention that student groups and other folks on the left did believe they would win! This analogy of the mirrored door is very apt, and it's one that I have tried to recreate in my approach toward the project. While I agree that it takes an immense conjectural shift to imagine the sociopolitical context of the 1970s, my capacity to speak with former residents helped to bridge the gaps in my understanding. They outlined the unique conditions of possibility that enabled Rochdale College to happen. I conducted interviews with Rochdale alumni but ultimately decided to ask them to read key documents from the College history for the camera. One text expresses the educational ideals of the College, another outlines rules for governing citizenship at Rochdale via a policy toward "crashers," and a third chronicles the federal government's outrage at the clean-up they were left with upon Rochdale's closure. By having College alumni perform these texts, I try to foreground their enduring presence, no matter how far socially and politically removed we appear to be from this episode of recent history. They are in their sixties, seventies, or eighties, and they continue to carry on and transmit the past.



In a similar way, I filmed the College building with attention to its details, in spite of the fact

that there's little to look at. Aside from *The Unknown Student* (the sculpture mentioned above), the lone evidence of Rochdale is a painted mural in the atrium. The building is underwhelming, and mute to the events that took place there. In the video, I combine and overlay images of the College building with archival photographs and documents that show the same site as a place of dynamic social life. The bifurcation that happens here—between a building that cannot express its history and fleeting photographs from the past—is part of the difficulties of *visualizing the political* you mentioned



above. Representations of the political are too often limited to acts of dissent and temporally limited to insurrectionary moments. For me, *the political* elides the fragmentary nature of its conventional representations because it is beyond visibility; it exists in forms that cannot be represented. With this modest project, I try to go beyond visibility as a singular approach toward representing history by engaging with the archive through mediated processes: through making, publishing, and performing. In so doing, history is not just represented, but made and re-made to animate the present.



Image credits

Video Stills: *Come Live with Us*. HD Video, 20:30, 2016

Installation views:

Installation view of *Come Live with Us* at The Art Museum at the University of Toronto Studio table with 3D-printed sculptures and inkjet prints, adhesive inkjet prints, spraypaint. 2016

Notes

- 1 *Dream Tower*. Dir. Ron Mann. Sphinx Productions, 1994.
- 2 Simpson, Robin. "Let the Buyer Beware." *This Book is a Classroom*, Passenger Books, 2012.
- 3 Raunig, Gerald. *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) (2013).