RECONVENCENCE / UNITED CONGRESS
**United Congress** was an art group consisting of unidentified Spanish feministas and activists that emerged in Calgary in the early ’90s. Their exhibition at The New Gallery assembled a team of experts from Ethiopia, Israel, and the Philippines to interpret, evaluate, authenticate, and catalogue artifacts unearthed from two 100 lb. United Congress time capsules stored in a military warehouse for twenty-five years.

**Reconvenience** by United Congress was on view in The New Gallery’s Main Space (208 Centre St SE) from September 5 to October 4, 2014.

The United Congress exhibition at The New Gallery was partly a retrospective of both their accomplishments and criticisms, partly a reunión, and partly a critique of other recent surveys of art from Calgary in the ’80s and ’90s—which have tended to eschew art’s position as a historical tool of social revolution to focus primarily on its formal qualities. United Congress’s work was often quite provocative, operating in socio-political contexts to challenge conservative conventions of the era. Here, there is a demonstration of art’s role in the ongoing dismantling of patriarchal status quos.

**Reconvenience** comprised incursions into conservative and commercially-orientated media outlets, collected detritus of the group’s early activities, and a labyrinthine performance at the exhibition’s vernissage.

This catalogue collects many of the research materials used to track down United Congress as well as several texts relevant to their practice.
1. What was the impetus that caused you to collectively found United Congress?

O rés do chão até o teto vimos nada, nada, nada.

2. What was your most successful endeavour? How do you define success?

Um monte de creme de marshmallow.

3. Did you have any failed or unfulfilled ventures?

Temos nada, mas falha alimentando a sede de nossa dor.

4. What role does “illogic” or “irrationality” play in your work?

Ilógico e irracional são o pão e a manteiga ao Congresso.

5. As a collective of feministas and activists, what have been some of your long-standing goals?

Espreitadelas furtivas de mulheres vizinhas.

6. Can you speak about the context for your actions in Calgary?

Houve algumas ações e eles estavam em Calgary, é inconteste.

7. How do you think about the role of art as a tool for social revolution?

É feio falar mal dos mortos.

8. What will the future be like?

Um pouco como isso, mas com mais páprica.


O Congresso de Jorge Luis Borges, se pudéssemos ler.
The United Congress is a long-standing artist collective active in Calgary, Alberta from the late 1980s to the present day. The group combines conceptual art, silkscreen, music, constructed language, abstraction, and anti-art in its activities.

Alberta visual artist and original Congress member Lisa Brawn describes the group as “interested in dadaist instigation, politics, intense productivity, anonymity, and relentless propagandizing.”

Beginnings

The United Congress was formed in 1988 at the Alberta College of Art + Design, by White-Field Senate, who is the group’s longest-standing member. Membership in the collective was loosely-knit and fluid. Earliest collective members were White-Field Senate, Lisa Brawn, Doug Nachtigall, Catherine Fisher, Connie Lambrecht, Andrea Ford, Elmer Xavier and Richard Farand.

Milo Dlouhy, Conroy Nachtigall, Kenneth Doren and Richard Cole also made contributions to the United Congress in its early days, and Dlouhy and Doren continued to be involved in Collective projects.

Yuriko Iga, one-time director of Blim Gallery in Vancouver, also contributed to the United Congress’ later projects in Calgary.

Early Projects

The House of Israel

The House of Israel was an art event held in response to the vandalism of a former downtown Calgary Synagogue by members of the Final Solution Skinheads, who covered the front of the building with white supremacist graffiti in November 1989. The show made statements opposing racist and anti-Semitic violence in Calgary, using music and visual art. The House of Israel show was set up shortly after the vandalism, at ACAD.

The Castration of St. Paul

The Congress’ most notable public show was The Castration of St. Paul, at the Nickle Arts Museum on the University of Calgary campus in February/March, 1991. Castration was intended to critique what The United Congress called the patriarchal nature of Christianity, and the show created “a virulent reaction” in the local press. "The Castration of St. Paul" featured thirty low-resolution colour xerox enlargements of Polaroid photographs of naked male torsos. Each enlargement was carefully framed and labeled with the name of a historic Christian religious figure, including the twelve Apostles, seven Old Testament Prophets, five early Christian Saints, the Trinity, John the Baptist, Martin Luther, and Pope John Paul II. Also part of the exhibit was a public lounge area featuring select pamphlets and literature promoting Christian organizations who espoused traditional values which the collective considered to be encouraging the subordination of females in family and public life.

Other Projects

Early collective member Lisa Brawn describes the UC of the 1980s and early 1990s as producing “rapid-fire shows using video surveillance, nets, creamed marshmallow and red packing tape” and jokes that the Congress took over the Alberta College of Art + Design “(l)ike a parasitic infestation.”

This period was very active for the United Congress, who assembled numerous shows on a variety of themes, including March 1989’s One Hundred Pounds of Pretty Girls, God Save the Queen in April, 1989 at the Marion Nicoll Gallery, Montreal at the Illingworth-Kerr Gallery in 1992, as well as CNIB, Recent Video Art by the United Congress (which contained no video art), The Sacred Shroud of Turin, and Our Ladies of Soul Sister. Each show was promoted by a run of hand-silkscreened posters distributed throughout the city.
The United Congress also collaborated with community groups to produce hand-screened posters for events such as Women Looking Forward’s 1989 International Women’s Day celebrations, and with the Calgary Jewish Centre for their multimedia presentation The Farthest Horizon: 100 years of Jewish Life in Alberta.

Publications

Daisy Gets Erotik

This collective also took on the publication of the ACAD Magazine, and in Oct 1989 the first issue of Daisy Gets Erotik was hand silk-screened and made available. “Daisy” was considered controversial as an official student newspaper, as it featured nudity. Publication ceased after three issues.

Development of ISU

In the early 1990s, UC founder White-Field Senate developed a constructed language inspired by Dutton Speedwords. Called ISU (short for “In Stat Ua” or “International Language”), the developed language attempted to root out perceived inherent biases (such as gender hierarchies) in existing world languages. In 1996, the United Congress published a book on the topic: ISU: THE NEW WORLD LANGUAGE.

Later Projects

United Missions

The United Congress collective briefly changed its name to United Missions in the mid-1990s, and for the 1997 Calgary ArtWeek Gala Bacchanal, presented Golden Boy, a show based on the personal artifacts of Rafael Albert, a Victorian cyclist.

Comme des Congres

In 1999, of The United Congress opened its Calgary street-front gallery, the Comme des Congres. The gallery hosted several shows, notably Alberto Guedea’s Re:<o><o>, “an investigation of art creation using electronic mail as a tool”, Hurting, and Self-Maintenance, which featured artist Carl Chapel George publicly attending to details of his personal hygiene, such as brushing his teeth, clipping his nails, plucking his eyebrows and ironing his clothes in view of gallery visitors and street-level passers-by.

Uncle Dutch (Correct Sounds for Instructing the People)

In 2012, United Congress founder White-Field Senate launched Uncle Dutch, an artistic look at language, meaning, and communication.

Related Projects

Colour For Industry

Sometime-United Congress-members and work together occasionally in a different Calgary artist collective. Colour For Industry combines digital opera, audio art, experimental music, modern dance and fabric arts to create works like ’s celebrated Allegro Molto Con Brio King Kong, a 1999 Digital Opera focused on pop culture connections to the Greek myth of Prometheus whose performance incorporated a string quintet, three dancers and video monitors.

Sugar Estate Art Salon

Former Congress members and collaborated on the Sugar Estate Art Salon Tea Room and Museum of Oddities, which existed from 2003 to 2004. The Salon “was formed to create an exquisite environment for interdisciplinary art exhibitions, performances, installations, etc.” in Calgary.

See also

- Appropriation (art)
- Art intervention
- Conceptual art
- Found art
- Performance art
Moral chaos and cultural anarchy: National Disunity

Originally published 3 August 1991 in *The Interim: Canada’s Life and Family Magazine*.

**AS MORALITY DISINTEGRATES**, culture becomes ever more preoccupied with sex, especially ‘kinky’ sex. One natural consequence of this development is an increased hostility to those who stand in the way of such aberrations. In North America today, this hostility manifests itself in progressively cruder attacks on Christianity. The most malicious attack on our traditional cultural and moral standards perhaps comes from militant homosexualism. Television, film and theatre have opened their doors to ‘gay’ productions and media commentators feel that they must give these special attention. “This was the season TV discovered gays,” editorialized the *Toronto Star* early in May. The paper went on to applaud the fact that television had come out of the closet and presented characters who were unequivocally ‘gay’. Describing half a dozen drama series featuring homosexuals who were not freaky, weird, or dying of AIDS, the paper concluded, “it has begun to reflect the real world.”

**Theatre**

This ‘real world’ became virtually the only world to be depicted on the Toronto stage in April of this year. Colin Thomas’s *Flesh and Blood*, a story of two brothers, one ‘straight’, the other ‘gay’, managed, according to one reviewer, “to make the humble condom a potent… dramatic symbol”; 2-2 *Tango* documented the ‘gay’ mating ritual. *Nocturnal Emissions the lesbian*. The last play seemed to ask the question, “What would the Swedish dramatist Strindberg have been like had he been a smart contemporary Canadian lesbian?” According to Jay Scott of the *Globe*. In the theatre program, author and director Marcy Rogers praised strange gods; she expressed gratitude to Isis “for being such a benevolent goddess.” In April as well, Jay Scott, himself a homosexual who has ‘come out of the closet’, reviewed a startling film, *Paris Is Burning*, which is not about Paris at all but about Harlem, New York’s world of ‘gay’ houses. The characters in it are mostly black or Hispanic and all of them are ‘gay’; they included transsexuals, drag queens, and a number of other curious categories of individuals, including ‘masculine lesbians’. The people filmed, said the director, could have been spiteful or angry, but their response to homophobia and racism was full of optimism and spirit. A homosexual culture can thrive, this movie implied.

**Amateur performers**

Then there was the dance/theatre presentation *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/the Promised Land*, which opened on April 23. For this author Bill T. Jones needed an improbable combination of extras – clergymen, and amateur performers willing to appear nude. In an interview with the *Toronto Star*, Jones said his mother had thought he would become a preacher because he
was a loner and introspective, but "instead I became a homosexual artist who preaches through my art." After a seventeen-year relationship, he lost his lover Arnie Zane to AIDS. He also lost his set designer, his costume designer, and one of his dancers – and he himself has tested HIV positive. As he put it, he was moved to ask whether he could believe in a God who allowed the decimation of the gay community. Promised Land, he said, represents his vision of an ideal world “The human body is our common denominator and by having 52 nudes on stage, "I'm asking people to see this commonality, yet accept our differences."

Brent Hawkes

It was much easier for him to find the nudes than the clergy, but several did oblige., including, predictably, Brent Hawkes, pastor of Toronto’s Metropolitan ‘Church’ in Toronto which caters to homosexuals. Commented Hawkes, "I was raised a fundamentalist and told that homosexuality is a sin…I want to get the good news out there that it's okay to be a gay and a Christian. I want everyone in the audience to hear it." Rober Everett-Green, reviewing the resulting performance in the Globe, called it “sprawling inquisition of the nature of grace, the price of freedom and the wages of bondage.” One of Jones’ own comments made it clear that his supposedly earth-shattering magnum opus was not free from banality: “Standing naked before your community is a life-changing experience. No one will ever look at you in the same way again.” But what more can be expected from a pseudo-artist who has reduced Dante’s vision of paradise to 52 nude bodies on a stage? Meanwhile, what should be noted is all the space this man gets in the Arts columns of the media.

Anti-Christian vulgarity

Still worse, if possible, appeared in a display at the Nickle Arts Museum at the University of Calgary. The exhibit under discussion, entitled “The Castration of St. Paul” by United Congress, consisted of thirty photocopied snapshots of penises. Underneath each was the name of Noah, Moses, Job, various Christian saints, and even Christ Himself and God the Father. The group of twelve art students responsible for the show said it was meant to funny; art historian David Bershad replied, “It’s not poking fun; it’s throwing excrement on what many people cherish. I’m sorry to say that I work at an institution that promotes and encourages it. It sickens me.” In his Westview column in the April 15 Western Report, Ted Byfield called the display obscene, blasphemous, juvenile – and the worst example of ‘politically correct’ sermonizing. Why could you attack the Christian religion with impunity, he asked, while jokes about homosexuality (say) are considered hatred”?

Professor Eric Cameron, head of the university’s art department, provided an answer: “We cannot accept attacks on Jews, women or other identifiable groups,” he explained. “Those people have no control over who they are. People do, however, have control over beliefs, so attacks on religion are permissible.” As Mr. Byfield
Tenho saudades tuas.
pointed out, this excuse was stupid beyond belief. The Cameron doctrine would allow one to ridicule the culture and customs of native Indians, since they had the option of rejecting such things. Similarly, it would silence the entire feminist movement, whose central target is the behaviour of men – who clearly do not choose to be males but simply are born as such.

A society at war

In his letter from the publisher on April 1, the Western Report’s Link Byfield had said, “You may not have noticed, but we are a society at war.” It is an ugly war, he declared because it is a religious one – between those who worship God and those who worship Self. The most militant propagators of selfism are politically extreme homosexuals, “who worship their genitals,” and extreme lesbian-feminists, “who (I gather from their incoherent writing) worship their ovaries.” Unless people go back to real churches and worship the real God, Link Byfield concluded, the plight of our nation is going to get worse. His father Ted added his own ironic comment. Those who protested against this absurd exhibition were not all Christians. A Calgary rabbi discerned it in an attack on all religions. Whether it is a fire bomb hurled into a Jewish funeral chapel (as happened while the exhibition was on) or sophomoric ridicule hurled at God through an art gallery, he said, the common denominator is hatred of religion. A Muslim protested as well.

War against decency

The real source of Canada’s problems today is not a difference of opinion over linguistic rights or provincial versus federal powers. It is our moral failure as a nation. Our universities and daily papers, as the above evidence shows, are rejoicing over the prevalence of sin; they are at war with decency. The war in the Gulf was a tame thing in comparison with our war, which in the form of abortion claims at least a hundred thousand victims a year in Canada alone. And that is only a symptom, a terrible symptom of our national decay. “Bend every effort,” John Paul II has said, “so that your laws and customs do not turn their back on the transcendent meaning of man or on the moral aspects of life.” This is a call to action – a call to which (as Ted Byfield has indicated above) Jew and Muslim and Sikh as well as Christian can respond. Only through a firm and persevering commitment to the common good can we maintain a society in which humane values have a legitimate place, instead of being consistently undermined.

ART—WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

Originally published 24 April 2011.

ART, A SNAPSHOT OF A CULTURE. Not only the art created but the art that survives tells a lot about the impression a culture wishes to leave to history. Art has to be especially scary in authoritarian times, it requires imagination to create and provokes emotion when viewed. Luckily it’s very easy to denigrate.

The first art controversy I remember is when the Canadian government purchased a piece of art for the national museum that consisted of 3 stripes. Oh the outrage over the photograph of the painting. What a waste of money. I jumped on that band wagon as well. Really, even I can create 3 stripes of colour and I’m no expert but I know what I like. Fast forward a couple decades; I went to an exhibition and spent most of my time standing in front of a white canvas. If photographed it would look like a polar bear beside an igloo in a blizzard. In reality there was an amazing display of texture and pattern impressed on that white canvas. I haven’t seen the 3 stripes but I can appreciate that if I did, they would speak to me the same way.

The first time an exhibit really made an impact on me was when I went to see The Castration of St. Paul. A friend said we should go see it while it was on campus. I wasn’t much interested in going to see photos of 30 male groins but I went anyway. I thought I would walk through unaffected, perhaps a little embarrassed, but the photographic style was very effective and the sheer numbers emphasised the tradition of patriarchy entrenched in religious authority. And that any male midriffs could stand in for any saint worth noting, well you know who the important ones are.

Piss Christ, created a few years before the Castration of St. Paul exhibit, was irreparably damaged this month by a religious mob while on display in France. A Christian’s ambiguous comment on the cheapening of religious icons has been destroyed at a time when religion is openly being used to get people to toe an authoritarian line of an earlier age. Had the artist not named the piece Piss Christ, one would simply marvel at the lighting that created an unearthly glow that reflects the holiness of Jesus. If only religious adherents had matured enough to see the irony of their protest.

I wish I could have seen this exhibit. A small image on a computer screen is compelling, I can only imagine the effect of the 60x40 inch work.

An exhibition in Bristol by Banksy.

Forget about thinking outside of the box. Banksy thinks outside of the frame.

Posh Spice shopping, moments after the next-door flour factory exploded.

One man’s graffiti is another (rich) man’s work of art. Sheila Stoddard, the museum’s curator of fine art, with a Banksy piece.

This is where I draw the line: vaguely reminiscent of the old gag ‘Beware of the d...’

Banksy shows a flagrant disregard for the ‘fourth wall’, while the wall on which it is hanging remains resolutely unbroken.

Images and one liners courtesy of The Guardian.

The bunny putting on makeup. That’s ironic.

Kids frolicking in body armour, that’s sardonic.

Fourth wall on the floor? Conic.

What’s this guy smoking? Chronic.

Classicism turned on its’ head. Doesn’t take itself seriously. Fantastic. ;)

I was in the fringes of an art collective called The United Congress when I was in school (mostly because my sister was a founding member). They hosted strange, and political exhibits in a similarly quirky vein.

Ha ha. Excellent. I love a good blaspheme; clears the sinuses and perks you up for the day ahead.
United Congress Reconvenience at The New Gallery

Originally published 4 September 2014 in Swerve.

THE ANONYMOUS, NON-HIERARCHICAL art group United Congress has no spokesperson. The members prefer to let their art do the talking. The group of “unidentified Spanish feministas and activists” produced their art in Calgary in the early ’90s. Their exhibition at The New Gallery is set up as an unveiling of “200-pound time capsules stored in a military warehouse for 25 years” paired with a pre-recorded message.

The New Gallery’s programming coordinator Steven Cottingham answered a few questions about the exhibit.

I actually wanted to ask about the description on the New Gallery page, which mentions that the show also functions as a critique of other art surveys of Calgary from the ’80s and ’90s “which have tended to eschew art’s position as a historical tool of social revolution to focus primarily on its formal qualities.” I thought that was an interesting premise. Could you maybe expand on that a bit?

To expand, the Reconvenience exhibition began as a reaction to the Made in Calgary and Made in Alberta survey exhibitions that have been held throughout the last year and a bit. Members of The New Gallery’s programming committee, myself included, were a little shocked that these shows purported to gather the most important work made in Calgary during the last decades of the 20th century but failed to recognize the work of United Congress—a group of artists who received an incredible amount of attention (both praise and condemnation) for their critically-minded pursuits. Additionally, aside from their anonymous group activities, the individual artists of United Congress have gone on to do many important things in the local community. They have started galleries, organized shows, and persistently advocated for the cultural growth of a city that has often been looked down upon as an ‘underdog’ in the national community. Their group and individual exclusion from these surveys—purposeful or ignorant—is something we wanted to address. Some of the curatorial statements from the Made in Calgary shows emphasize the formal qualities of work that originated in Calgary; focusing on the aesthetic trends that occurred within a certain geography. As a committee, we asked if the appearance of these works was really the defining the zeitgeist of the era—and what does it mean to re-exhibit this work in a contemporary context? Was ‘style’ the most important aspect of art-making in the ’90s?

Obviously these images have a political lean, why is the social revolution element such an important part of art?

Our mandate at The New Gallery is to support and showcase art that is socially- and politically-relevant. We believe United Congress’s past and current practice aligns itself with our own desires, so we worked with
them to create an exhibition that is partly a retrospec-
tive and partly a contemporary critique of the way we
quantify 'importance.' Looking back, I see art in the '80s
and '90s playing an incredibly important social role, as
more and more female and queer artists reacted to the
overwhelmingly straight, white, male-dominated scene.
This new wave of previously repressed voices within the
arts community was mirrored by overt cultural changes
within Western society at large. This was a time when
third-wave feminism began, focusing on social rights as
much as civic ones, and when the AIDS crisis necessi-
tated a considered look at the rampant homophobia and
discrimination of the time. Many artists, United Congress
included, used gallery shows and guerrilla endeavours to
bring these issues to the attention of a wider public. We
believe that these social concerns (among others) are
what defined the last decades of the 20th century and,
indeed, are still desperately relevant in the context of the
present. To dismiss the effects (and catalysts) of these
crucial and revolutionary moments in favour of aesthetic
trends seems to be a continued symptom of unchecked
privilege.

Art can do more than decorate. It is a forum for self-ex-
pression, and for many who differ from the majority
demographics, it is one of the only venues through which
individual experiences can be shared. Celebrating differ-
ence is crucial.

Galleries+United+Congress+Reconvenience+Gal-
lery/10175009/story.html
Originally published on Art Central’s blog.

**WHAT KIND OF ARTWORK do you make?** Figurative woodcuts and paintings and scheming up alternative venues/project spaces: Sugarmobile, Sugar Gallery, and with Milo Dlouhy: Sugar Estate, Portrait Estate, and The National Portrait Gallery Inc.

**Where did you learn to paint/sculpt etc.?** ACAD, about one or two thousand years ago when it was just ACBC. I would like to return one day wearing a small cap and plaid shortpants.

**What path led you to the work you do now?** At ACAD a few of us started The United Congress, which was a group interested in dadaist instigation, politics, intense productivity, anonymity and relentless propagandizing. Like a parasitic infestation within minutes we took over the newspaper, the halls, the lecture theatre, the ladders, the walls, the cafeteria, and we intimidated Ron Moppett until he gave us the Illingworth Kerr Gallery. That’s where I met Milo, pummelling Ron. We produced rapid-fire shows using video surveillance, nets, creamed marshmallow and red packing tape. Through and The United Congress has been covertly operating for 20 years in Vancouver, Reykjavik, and Osaka, but Portrait Estate recently detected weakness in the United Congress organization and made a hostile $2 billion takeover bid for their One Minute Happiness gallery on 17 Ave in the interest of creating an oligopoly.

The start of the alternative venues obsession for me was in 2000 when I went looking for an ice cream truck to use as a mobile gallery and found a 1935 silver trailer that needed complete restoration. Two of the high points of Sugarmobile were Joe Kelly’s Battleship Identifier, very kindly co-sponsored by Stride Gallery, and a show by Mireille Perron’s students at ACAD.

In November 2001 Sugar Gallery opened in the Grain Exchange, where seven months of interdisciplinary events started with pseudo-craft production of World Wrestling cross-stitches. The gallery finale Sugar Smut Show involved 26 artists including Decidedly Jazz Danceworks choreographed by Kim Cooper and videos from Brian Batista and Shauna Kennedy. This megalomaniacal event received support from TRUCK. Thank you TRUCK!

In 2003 and I started a band, The Talentless Amateurs, and performed our “Scathing Revue”, beating Wax Mannequin in a Battle of the Bands at The New Gallery. Our tactic was to wear him down, and luckily after several hours he conceded defeat or we would still be there.

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