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Carnegie Art Center,  
 North Tonawanda (Buffalo), New York,  
 February 15 – March 29, 2003

Works by: Nathalie Bookchin, Brian Collier, Julia Dzwonkoski, Ra'ad Walid, Caroline Koebel, Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, Omar and Carlos Estrada, Igor Vamos

The Carnegie Art Center is housed in a turn of the century library in North Tonawanda, New York, and curator Paul Vanouse seems to have had this historical fact in mind when putting this recent exhibition together. Recognizant of Jorge Luis Borges's "Library of Babel," *Art of the Encyclopedic* deals with methodologies for organizing information, but has a structure which corresponds to the infinite. Imagine a library containing every word ever written – the enormity renders human reductions infinitesimal. Any book is in fact an infinity of marks, space, and references to a world outside, with dictionaries being perhaps the best example, for each word frenetically gathers and depends upon other words. One can read within and around in it infinitely; it has no beginning or end.

*Art of the Encyclopedic* balances on the brink connecting art, private obsession, hobby, and wonder. For instance, *How I Learned*, by Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, inventories an entire season of camera shots from the 1970s television series "Kung Fu." This obsessive collection includes over 200 CDs organized by topics such as "how I learned to be evil," "how I learned to pan right," "how I learned to use clanging tool sounds," "how I learned to be one with the grass," and "how I learned about exploiting workers." Viewers can walk up and change the CDs as they wish. This exhaustive cataloging/remixing project, in the words of the artists, "reveals life's lessons learned from years of watching television." In many of the excerpts it is difficult to avoid a confrontation with an embarrassing level of 1970s-brand American racism. In other excerpts, ridiculous pokes are taken at some of the filmmaking tropes used by "Kung Fu," such as in "how I learned to pan right," which makes one wonder if almost every scene opens with a right pan, and in "how to be one with the grass," which suggests a collection of transcendent nature experiences, but instead simply gathers footage where characters' clothing matches and blends into the field through which they move.

Caroline Koebel's interactive website and video *Paraiso* offers samples of people dancing to "Salsa Con Coco" by Dominicanos En Salsa. Koebel states that this is part of a larger project whose "mission (is) to collect and analyze erotic data." Here, any of 93 possible moments of erotic motion in the dance are looped

in the center of a computer screen. One can click on arrows around the display region in the screen center to either bring what Koebel calls "rapid ecstasy units" closer or farther away in view, or to change which rapid ecstasy unit is displayed. The sensitivity and beauty of these small units of motion is quite captivating – the slight turn of a hand, or light moving slowly across the back of a shaved head, expand such fleeting moments and show them to be the very stuff of eros. Other moments call up the element of chance in eros, such as two people almost bumping into each other on the dance floor then turning, laughing, and seeming to apologize with their facial expressions. Moments like this one in *Paraiso* also suggest an ethical dimension to erotic life. In addition, Koebel sends the footage from the computer to a custom feedback relay, which re-processes and re-orders the signal and displays it on a giant video monitor nearby. This re-processed representation appears as colorful noise which changes with every click of the mouse, both suggestive of the noise created by points of erotic contact, and reminiscent of the erotic noise created by engaging with the work of art.

Ra'ad Walid presented excerpts from a collecting project called *The Atlas Group*. This display contained eerily timely photos from the Lebanese civil wars of 1975-91, during which 245 car bombs were exploded. As these images evidence, after car bombs go off, the only part left of a car is the engine and sometimes the front end. This display shows photos of the remains of exploded cars and gives information concerning incidents of car bomb detonations, such as an instance of a burning piece of a car flying over a balcony and into a home.

➔ *I'll Have a Starling*, by Brian Collier, tracks the migration of the starling across North America. A crucial piece of information is that the starling, as Collier puts it, "was introduced to the Americas on March 16, 1891, by Eugene Schieffelin... (who) decided that it was his calling to introduce all the birds referenced in Shakespeare to North America." Apparently, of these birds, only the starling survived. The project includes, among other things: photographs and digitally exaggerated images of flocks of starlings colonizing trees, wires, and entire skylscapes; a moving handmade metal mobile of flocks of starlings; information on the environmental impact of their migration (some of which is presented in small handmade books); references to the starling in Shakespeare; and a dead starling preserved in a jar of alcohol displayed with its wings spread. The organization of *I'll Have a Starling* calls up the flock itself, both by its mixing of digital media with raw materials and by its many small parts which take over the center of the room and almost seem to swirl around each other. Like the English countrymen who brought Shakespeare to North America, the starling has actually had a devastating effect on the continent. Collier points out that their feces is poisonous to some trees and they

have caused incredible harm to several other species of bird. One part of Collier's piece, called "Effects on Native Bird Species," provides handmade cardboard cutouts of the birds who have been effected by the introduction of the starling. The cardboard cutouts of effected birds make them appear so adorable, so that pondering their fate provokes both laughter and anger. ➔

The room where *I'll Have a Starling* is displayed is a large, airy rotunda, in which the work fills the back wall and center of the room. On either side of it are works that are two collections of doubles. One aspect of infinity is highlighted by this arrangement: the two doubles collectors, Igor Vamos and Julia Dzwonkoski, attended Reed College at the same time, yet, in spite of the show bringing them together, they still have not met. Like their own collections, the two collectors perform an enactment of doubling. Like facing pages in an early atlas or encyclopedia, they are connected yet separate and brought together only by chance.

Vamos's *Twin Collection* is remarkable in that every set of doubles is almost exactly identical. Two precisely matching portraits of an androgynous person, painted by someone who signed "Dubois," appear not unlike the amateur paintings one might find in a thrift store. Two boat motors, both of the Johnson Seahorse brand, lay next to one another on a table, the main difference between the two being that one of them is leaking oil. The strangeness of these matches helps the doubter to warrant their being exhibited, yet they are such ordinary, sometimes even ugly, objects. Facing Vamos's collection across the room is Dzwonkoski's *The Museum of the Double*, which, unlike Vamos's collection, mostly consists of "doubles" whose relationships are often difficult to discern. The near randomness of this collection recalls the pre-museum Wunderkammer. In order to see the objects as doubles, one must imagine relationships, draw connections, and invent categories that are clearly one's own.

However, the desire to rationalize and develop smooth categories in this way is precisely what *Art of the Encyclopedic* challenges. Vanouse's curation is playful and irreverent towards the notion of high art; the show honors equally hobbies and things people do in their homes. Likewise, as in a flock of birds, depending on the point toward which one directs one's thinking in this old library, the arrangement and order of things shifts, re-connects, re-cognizes, and heads somewhere else. What once seemed to neatly fit into one collection, suddenly breaks away and returns to the world. Gustave Flaubert once said, "What mind worthy of the name ever reached a conclusion?" In this spirit, *Art of the Encyclopedic* plays with the categorizing and conclusion-drawing habits of the mind. It gathers together a few in an infinite flux of erotic moments, but ultimately, rather than pointing to itself, it opens out on a universe of possibility.