



Dick Avern, *The Armchair Terrorist - Making a Stand*, lightjet print on aluminium, 28" X 40", 2003.

violence in "The Shining". A sentence stream of text interrupts the pleasant continuity of domestic/nature images:

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy"

Insidious, abrupt, and impersonal, the text insists that there is something wrong with our ideas about techno-media, "the good life" and domestic plenty. It may be read as a subtext that hints at the false promise of consumerism.

As a Media Democracy Day witness to Kahre's interrupted stream of sweet music and eye candy, Vela-Martinez's objects of red alert, and the remains of Avern's straight-jacketed struggle, I exit the gallery with feelings of political apprehension, but not, I am happy to say, of apathy.

Heather Passmore
04/11/03



Carlos Vela-Martinez, *Security Response (I)*, ABC fire extinguishers (charged), reinforced hose, pressure fittings, steel, 23"x 23"x 22", 2003.

Dick Avern
Andreas Kahre
Carlos Vela-Martinez

Emergency Measures
October 18 - November 22, 2003

Information about this exhibition is available on-line at www.artspeak.ca



Emergency Measures, installation view, 2003.

ARTSPEAK
an artist run centre
233 Carrall Street
Vancouver British Columbia
Canada V6B 2J2

T (604) 688-0051
F (604) 685-1912
E artspeak@artspeak.ca
W www.artspeak.ca

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POST SCRIP T

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04/11/03 Dick Avern
Andreas Kahre &
Carlos Vela-Martinez

Emergency Measures



Carlos Vela-Martinez, *Security Response (III)*, ABC fire extinguishers (charged),reinforced hose, pressure fittings, steel,23"x 23"x 22",2003.

Emergency Measures

"An aroused public within the more free and democratic societies can direct policies towards a much more humane and honourable course" Noam Chomsky 9/11 (2001).

Emergency Measures opened at Artspeak on October 18th,Media Democracy Day. As part of this international occasion, Vancouver's main library was home to 9 hours of events organized to increase awareness of media issues, alternatives, and reform. Post-celebration, my engagement with the work of Dick Avers,Andreas Kahre, and Carlos Vela-Martinez was a welcome experience. As the political effectivity of art is made dubitable by the growth of corporate media's monotone/ous thought monopoly, artwork in alternative spaces is necessarily invested with increasing importance. It is in the Information Age, ironically, that freedom of expression is threatened through diminishing democratic rights to communicate. And in some measure, contemporary art contributes to the counterbalance of ideological power. Most meaningfully perhaps, it does so through the validation of different modes of experience and knowledge, and a continued commitment to the cultivation of critical thinking. *Emergency Measures* succeeds in questioning supposed states of emergency, and indicates other political and art historical situations of urgency.

Artspeak gallery sets the scene of emergency with fire extinguishers,a pin-striped armchair and a stream of comfortable domestic imagery running alongside a saccharine soundtrack. Called up by their absence, political and environmental catastrophes frequently sensationalized by media are then tied to the seeming safety of middle-class props. Although the space is free of shocking or sensational imagery, it is psychologically complicated by the disturbing arrangements and promises of its familiar contents.

Offering a pleasure without innocence, Carlos Vela-Martinez' installed fire extinguishers scream for attention clustered attractively in glossy candy apple red. Hoses snake surreally across the floor and fixtures hover dangerously over head. Ubiquitous and overlooked,these objects call attention to other measures taken in the name of perceived environmental, social,economic, and/or political threats to public safety. Ironically, it may be government declarations of emergency and cultivated climates of fear that require urgent public response. Worldwide there has been an increase in unaccountable executive powers,and a silencing of opposition,as bells, whistles and red alerts step up the 'manufacture of consent'. Dialogue and independent thought diminish as people adjust first their actions,then their thinking to accommodate emergency governmental controls. It is worth quoting American Justice Louis D. Brandeis' 1927 "freedom of speech" defense of Anita Whitney, tried for helping establish California's Communist Labor Party – an organization that the state charged was intent on the violent overthrow of government. Identifying a dangerous cycle of fear, Justice Brandeis explains:



Andreas Kahre, *Emergency Theory*, mixed media installation, detail,2003.

"That it is hazardous to discourage thought,hope and imagination;that fear breeds repression;that repression breeds hate;that hate menaces stable government;that the path of safety lies in the opportunity to discuss freely supposed grievances and proposed remedies...Only an emergency can justify repression".

From the bureaucratic nuisance of excessive safety signage, to the abuse of public panic, emergencies now justify repression. Clustered together in seven canisters of excess,or poised to shoot at a viewer; Vela-Martinez' fire extinguishers remind us that common sense is threatened by the (runaway) logic of safety. Defying functionality, their hoses extend to absurd lengths and seem to strangle each other.

Stitched to the uniform of business, the tangled straps of Avers' armchair suggest the struggles of its previous sitter –The Armchair Terrorist. Ironically enough, this sculpture evokes Henri Matisse's bourgeois desires for art as "a cerebral sedative" and "comfortable easy chair" for the tired businessman. A theatrical mess of papers, mainstream newspapers,and a cardboard Coca-Cola case, accompany its troubled calm.This power-suited prop is utilized by the artist in performance pieces within galleries and at strategic locations around the city. On October 18th,the Artspeak audience voted to stage this performance at the populous centre of Media Democracy Day, over other sites of economic and socio-political significance such as banks and foreign embassies. The relationship between performance artist, middle class audience, and big business are seen and sewn together in this suited "Seat of Power". What can the (potential) power relationship



Andreas Kahre, *Emergency Theory*, mixed media installation, detail,2003.



Dick Avers, *Seats of Power - The Armchair Terrorist*, custom chair, suit harness,ties 40"x 40"x 60",2003.

between the public and corporate media be, when viewers watch TV from similar armchairs on an average of 2000 hours annually? Not including time spent on the Internet or reading, this is the equivalent of 83 days each year. What kind of place can art claim when this seat is so obviously taken? The artists' posturing in the garb of society's powerful is both a playfully radical and radically optimistically role, particularly for the academically marginalized political performance artist. In a pin-striped suit, this theatrical figure also forms a stock character whose self-emancipation from the chair inspires others to escape "comfort".

Andreas Kahre's enclave within the gallery emits a soothing nostalgic soundtrack,which accompanies a video of comfortable domestic imagery. Kitchens, bedrooms,spice racks, and floral patterns run horizontally like a store shelf for the viewer's perusal. A turn dial promises the ability to meaningfully manipulate this media, but frustrates viewers with minimal and interruptive effect. Frequent use invariably runs up against a single tone of alarm and a blank screen displaying "invalid user id". Disorienting, and beautiful, each image emerges from its flip side like a Rorschach.With a protracted gaze their movement and screen-flicker can induce a dizzy nausea. Recreation and the psychology of the spectator/consumer are also called to mind by a creepy admonition about boredom and exhaustion made famous by Jack Nicholson's psychopathic portrayal of domestic