photograph, showed a view from the Musée Rimbaud in the poet's birthplace of Charleville. From a visual standpoint, this photograph was much like any number of travelogue photographs with good production values, and seemed unexceptional. There is a sad irony in this museum, this retroactive canonization of a figure who was so little accepted by his contemporaries. And there is something absurd in the resort to so much solidity and fixity to commemorate a figure so possessed by wanderlust, for whom "real life" was always "elsewhere." Perhaps the "travelogue" format was intended as a sly way of being truer to Rimbaud, of undermining the impulse toward fixity by inscribing the museum in the flow of travel. It is, certainly, easy to imagine the fascination of difference, the hold, that Rimbaud's loneliness and alienation might have for an artist such as April, who seems typically immersed in the richness of her life with people.

*Le Portrait de Michèle* (1993) displayed certain of the *intimiste* features that have led critics to see April's work as a single autobiographical project that draws the artist and her friends under a sort of unifying umbrella. *Le Portrait . . .* consisted of a large photographic portrait of a friend of the artist laminated onto a sheet of raw canvas and suspended before the gallery's only section of exposed brick wall. An installation-like way of reacting to the space was implied. The "subject," a woman comfortably seated in her study, was ostensibly a good example of "straight," "unmanipulated" photography, being so plain and straightforward as to require some "offstage" motif (friendship, good times, etc.) to explain its existence. Yet closer study (and questions to the gallery director) revealed a whole set of *métier* references which suggest that the "subject" was not altogether the woman in the chair. First of all, a loose stack of videocassettes alluding to the woman's profession of video artist quoted a practice used widely in portrait painting. On the bookshelf behind her was a volume on the "subject's" favourite painter, Hubert Robert. (Robert [1733-1808], a painter of ruins, is commonly credited with being the first to treat them as subjects in their own right, instead of as merely picturesque accessories.) Was the mounting on canvas a further reference to painting? Was there an attempt to turn intellectual references into material accretions? If so, why? I kept thinking of Rimbaud's proclamation: *"J'ai horreur de tous les métiers."*

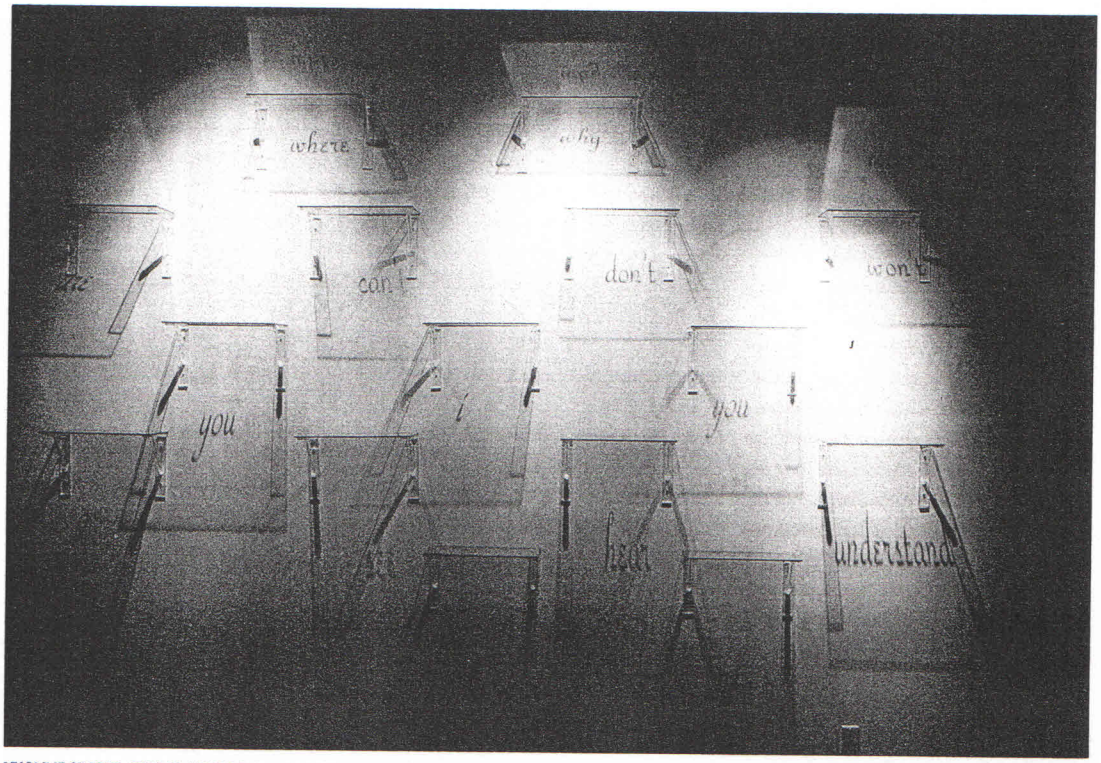
Overall, the show was a heterogeneous assortment of works accessible in varying degrees along a scale ranging from relative transparency to a near hermeticism. Now, with regard to the question of relative inaccessibility, I am inclined to be more patient in arrangements where the unknowable or supremely private quality appears to partake of general conditions of life and intersubjectivity. But in the retrospective type of situation which this show approximated (although it was not exactly a retrospective showing), and especially in situations where the question of genre is brought so much to the fore, one tends to expect relationships among works and periods to be more precisely articulated. Yet this was not done. Perhaps the need for it is only a reflex conditioned by past practices. As it was, for me this unsatisfied need had a contradictory consequence: I came to appreciate April's raw, unsettled way of leaving works to stand independently; and I wished for more connection among them.

– DONALD MCGRATH

Parachute #74
1994

## YVONNE SINGER

**The Koffler Gallery, North York, September 8 – October 13**




YVONNE SINGER, THE GLASS ROOM, 1993, INSTALLATION VIEW; PHOTO: JEFF NOLTE, COURTESY THE KOFFLER GALLERY.

With fragments of news headlines, recollections, and isolated words, Yvonne Singer's installation, *In Memoriam: Remembering and Forgetting Fragments of History*, reopened the question of how the past comes to us. Is knowledge about past events, specifically the Holocaust, equivalent to remembering them? Public discussions during the installation sparked lively, empathetic dialogue about sharing history and appealed to an audience including young African-Canadians, Holocaust refugees and relatives, ordinary Ontario WASPS, feminists, Europeans and my California-raised self. In this work and context, what particular claim did remembrance make? Since the past is transmitted by signs, how was I enmeshed in their historicization?

Singer's exhibition opened against the background of the new Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C., and the broadcast of documentary Holocaust films on PBS television. In stark contrast to the factual, illustrative documents that sustain those appeals to remember this history, Singer used the most ephemeral means, the shadowy display of fragmentary texts and isolated words cast across the walls of two rooms.

The small *Felt Room* (7 x 10 x 6 1/2') was framed in steel poles and cables and paneled in thick felt. In the context of Joseph Beuys' work, felt connotes life preservation and warmth. Singer's room, however, with its high walls and narrow approach passage, recalled the padded cells of an asylum or torture chamber from which neither sounds nor glances can escape. Silently, messages in red ran across an LED display above one's head; the admo-

nition, "Listen carefully . . . This is important," was followed by headline fragments charting the character, deeds and disappearance of Raoul Wallenberg. Blank spaces and confessions of lapse punctuated the news fragments: "I can't remember . . . I forgot."

Wallenberg was a Swedish diplomat posted in Budapest who saved thousands of Jews from the Nazis by issuing them Swedish passports and organizing safe houses before he disappeared into the Soviet gulag. Singer was born in one of Wallenberg's safe houses after her mother had been refused by Budapest hospitals. With no personal connections to these events, how could I remember someone who made such a difference? Ironically, Singer's project was motivated by the same problem. She never knew Wallenberg, and found that her attempts to recover his story repeatedly ran into the limits of family memories conditioned by personal perspective, the corrosion of time and the necessity to go on. Her installation clarified to what extent knowledge and remembrance depend upon the management of facts reconstructed through networks of personal, commercial and political interests.

The LED messages sustained no consistent subject position; they conflated the position of reader with listener and speaker by crosscutting injunction, objective report, and confession. The first voice, "Listen carefully . . .," swerved ambiguously between authoritative historiographer and intimate storyteller. The second voice reported objective information such as: "He was the scion of an aristocratic Swedish family." The third voice, speaking about lapses and in the first person, appealed for identification through implied shared guilt. It asked viewers to admit that they shared the weakness of being suspended in faulty memories. The authoritative voice told one how to remember, whereas the genealogical information purported to be objective and necessary. Together they reported Wallenberg's history as resistant to interrogation. In dominant white culture, the ideology and practice of objectivity and authority tend to devalue storytelling and confession in favour of reporting events as though they somehow represented themselves, as if they had an unimpeachable, a priori standing. Nonetheless, objective history seems especially vulnerable to forgetting; it is nobody's story, nobody's memory. The first-person confession of lapse opened a hole in objectivity: just who forgot, objective history, or I alone? It is easy and attractive to permit the first two voices to absorb mine into a position constructed as authoritative knowledge, but what is forgotten? Can knowledge be remembrance, or does knowledge leave scars marking what should be remembered? Immersing me in a pool of different voices, the felt chamber undermined a notion of history as a causal chain of events leading to the truth of the past, and I re-lived the unstable conflict between voices of official distancing and those of emotional identification whispering of the forgotten.

In Singer's *Glass Room*, light from above shone on words etched into glass shelves and cast shadows down the gallery walls. One text recorded a woman's recurrent childhood fantasy of solitary confinement and her trust in her grandfather's knowledge as a survival tool:

> Would I have enough resources inside my head to keep me going? How many songs and poems could I remember? I was told that my grandfather had a prodigious memory. He could remember all the words to over 100 songs and could speak several languages. I thought, he would do well in solitary confinement.

But could these alone sustain him? Even as the text expressed faith in the generative power of a collective memory embedded in language, its shadow faded with distance from the light, becoming vulnerable to misrecognition.

Another wall supported glass shelves etched with single words and a question mark in the stylish Park Avenue typescript of the 1930s. The shadow collage of adverbs, verbs and pronouns made possible questions such as "Where?" "Why can't you understand?" "Won't I see you?" The questions stirred uncanny memories of invocations uttered in the public and private domains of church and home: "Mother, Father, can't you see me?" "*Seigneur*, please listen." As a plea, invocation constitutes an other whose look grants visibility and gives meaning, but whose refusal to respond threatens symbolic annihilation. As such, invocation affirms an arbitrary external power to legislate the conditions of visibility, such as solitary confinement. When viewed from this perspective, a forgotten Wallenberg or "Why won't you see me?" do not emerge from the neutral states of invisibility but from acts of public and private repudiation which had secured meaning and recognizability for others. Invocation is more than a plea to emerge from invisibility and be remembered – it is also an implicit demand for justice.

Justice from whom? Singer's intimate voices again sought my alliance: come closer, take up this memory into your seeing and listening – though forgetting – body. The subject positions offered were of both appeal and repudiation. In the shadowy collage both voices merger; I am supplicant and arbitrator. Their intermingled play claimed from me acknowledgment that the repudiated remains a residue of where I have been and what I have denied, constituting the dark underside of my propriety. Remembrance emerged here as an assertion of my complicity with repression, whether in real action or symbolically. While remembrance might be emancipatory, while it might incite personal rebellion against injustice, it is not simply a safe thing to do. Remembering Raoul Wallenberg and others blurs the bounds staking my propriety; taking them into my seeing and listening body threatens my symbolic integrity.

– TILA KELLMAN

## SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION

**One Queen Street East, Toronto, November 20 – December 16**

Spontaneous Combustion is a collective of artists which has survived as such since 1989. In that year they debuted as a group (numbering fifteen) at the Old Massey Ferguson showroom on King Street. Eleven artists contributed to the exhibition under review here.

The year of their inauguration also marked the recessionary slide of Toronto towards the status of a post-industrial city. Since then, the glut of untenanted commercial space in downtown Toronto has grown significantly. Such conditions allowed last year's show (at the corner of Queen and Yonge Streets) to find quite spacious lodging. The work was spread over several rooms in a mildly labyrinthine arrangement.

As you came in the door, Bill Crane caught you with *Harold's Question* (1993), a multi-element work. It included a shelf of books jacketed in reproductions of the cover from an encyclopædic reference work by Dr. Harold Shryock, MD. If you took as evidence the root images emblazoned on small shields (like coats of arms) running along both walls of the corridor, then burgeoning manhood was a relatively uncomplicated business for Dr. Shyrock. But Crane confounded these images of church and school and career by overpainting and collage, often making apparent a homoerotic suggestiveness which amusingly redirected so many tokens of simplistic fifties provenance.

John McLachlin, nearly ubiquitous in this group exhibition, also elaborated on the whole issue of being gay. The strongest aspect of his many efforts here was a series of printing plates carrying articles and items culled from many sources. Included among these were parts of police documents made available through the Freedom of Information Act. They included word association tests designed to measure someone's homosexuality quotient and lists of words in which asterisked items supposedly bore homosexual connotations. These items seemed to have been the key to lists of words the artist stencilled on several walls throughout the show.

Inset into the wall at the end of the corridor carrying Crane's shields