

AESTHETIC AGGRESSION: A CANADIAN ARTIST VISITS RAPA NUI

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AS A CANADIAN CULTURAL THEORIST deeply committed to Rapa Nui, the implicit endorsement by a major Canadian periodical of Montreal artist Bill Vazan's so-called "landworks," recently superimposed on Rapa Nui like so much graffiti, is appalling in several ways. I am embarrassed and offended, insulted and enraged, on behalf of the people of the island and their sadly attenuated heritage. I am equally embarrassed and offended, insulted and outraged, that an establishment organ like *Canadian Art* would provide Vazan a forum, not only to display illegal pictures of illegal work, but to trivialize the protestations of islanders and their supporters with ignorance and condescension. If his essay were coherent or even spirited in his own defense, it would be one thing. That it is neither lends to his work more devastating implications than he could possibly grasp.



One of Vazan's "art works" in front of *ahu* Hanga Ki'oe near Tahai. The stones are from the *ahu* rubble and some are statue fragments.

The first thing one notices about *Canadian Art* is money. A high-gloss quarterly published with the financial support of the Governments of Canada and Ontario through a variety of agencies, *Canadian Art* is full color from beginning to end. The last word in the Fall 2005 issue is given to a back cover advertisement for the ultimate in conspicuous consumption, the Cadillac SRX, a sport-utility vehicle floating in liminal blue. This is the other side of the art world, the polar opposite to the struggling artist; this is about marketing and flash. In the issue, Volume 22, Number 3, there is a five page article, forty percent in text, sixty in photographs, by Bill Vazan peddling his various acts of desecration on Easter Island as artistic expression and branding the local authorities who objected as primitives and dupes. It is a shameful piece of arts journalism, a swaggering account of cultural piracy. In

achieving recognition by the establishment of his own community, through unchallenged publication in *Canadian Art*, the artist as outlaw strikes gold.

In the last few sentences I have used words freighted with meaning, not for the sake of rhetorical design but to indicate the nature of Vazan's cultural travesties as implicitly sanctioned by Canadian government agencies and the dominant intelligentsia in what is generally thought to be a civilized country. Peddling, desecration, primitives, dupes, shameful, piracy, outlaw. These are strong words. They are born out of a reasonable response to the publication of Vazan's article in *Canadian Art*. On their own, Vazan's activities on the island are badly informed misdemeanors, but they do not add up to "piracy," the taking or using of unauthorized or illegal materials for public dissemination and/or personal profit. He is an outlaw of puny proportions, convicted of desecrating sacred sites. What he did was shameful, yes, but it is in the publication of his careless disregard for the historic values of others, exploitation of their cultural capital, of their religious heritage and ancestral dignity, that his "landworks" become piracy.

By now, anyone interested knows the details. For the rest of the world, if noticed at all, the incident has slipped into obscurity. For an aware Canadian, perhaps, erasure is not quite so easy as elsewhere. The Rapanui have their own reasons for remembering what will be assimilated as one more example of effacement as an expression of imperial ignorance and condescension. After all, outsiders are convicted on a regular basis for mutilations of *moai*, and others make money with travesties of island culture in fantasy fiction and cavalier appropriation of iconic images. But Canada is culturally an intertextual phenomenon, self-conscious and self-sustaining more than most.

I was previously aware of Vazan's work because there is a stone sculpture outside our art gallery in Peterborough, Ontario, which seems to conflate aspects of local Anishnabi petroglyphs with Aboriginal dot-art from the Antipodes to create a rather pleasing cultural pastiche. I first heard about his Rapa Nui venture on April 19, 2005, when the Arts website of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation reported the detention of a Montreal-based artist on "Chile's Easter Island." I later read about it in newspaper reports, in Yahoo's Rapa Nui chat site, in e-mails from friends, and then, in its apotheosis, as a significant event in the collective Canadian experience, in *Canadian Art*.

As the CBC reported, earlier that month Bill Vazan was accused of displacing rocks of archeological significance on the island to create "land configurations." Vazan paid a Chilean resident of Rapa Nui, twenty-year old Genaro Gatica, to help him rearrange stones at various ceremonial sites to be photographed as art. As a consequence, the Rapa Nui court ruled that he was to destroy the 36 rolls of film the authorities had confiscated, pay a \$6,200 fine, be banned from the island for two years, and write letters of apology to the National Monuments Council, the head of the National Parks Agency, the governor of the island and the mayor of Hanga Roa.

There is nothing in the CBC report to indicate that Vazan's violation was anything other than of "archeological"

significance, no indication that he desecrated sites of spiritual or cultural importance to the contemporary islanders. On the same day as the CBC report, the Rapa Nui Information Center, a Yahoo site for conversations about the island, had a discussion thread started by José Miguel Ramírez of the Centro de Estudios Rapa Nui, Universidad de Valparaíso, explaining the Rapanui response to Vazan's actions. The Rapanui took issue with "using a sacred island place for a personal foreign purpose" regardless of what that purpose might be, whether to make art, produce a Hollywood movie, film a commercial advertisement, inappropriately reconstruct an *ahu* platform, or destroy ceremonial sites through the grazing of imported animals. The thread ended with a clarion call to resist damaging further the culturally sacred Rapa Nui archaeological sites that have been disrespected for too long.

Bill Vazan appeared to make the required compensations to the local authorities and was released from custody and returned to Canada, but he does not seem to have understood the concept of respect that the islanders were asking for their material heritage. Following his return, he wrote the article published in *Canadian Art*. His piece is oddly titled, "Pacific Prison." As the following excerpt illustrates, he shows a dismaying lack of engagement with Rapa Nui cultural history or notions of the cultural integrity of Others.

"I had admitted ...that I had laid out a ground configuration of volcanic stones...just to one side of a ceremonial area. Easter Island...has hundreds of these stone-rubble mounds along its coast ... maybe my hired assistant of three days had ratted on me—they got me at my guest house ...they asked to see the rolls I had shot...I wanted to be the first into that suitcase... I revealed the 36 rolls of film they were after...later...the police would publicly destroy the film. My slight of hand arrangements of the contents of my suitcase during the inspection and the detectives' unfamiliarity with film formats, however, had left me with 80 ... color slides. [3 days into my detention] the Prosecution lawyer presented written testimony from [my assistant] and photos of three other works... one of the three...contained a [part] of a toppled *moai* Normally I avoid obtaining official approval for my land configurations, as I have found it results in a great loss of time and energy. My decision to visit Easter Island was last-minute. I figured I could sidestep the bureaucracy and handle my interventions in a responsible way, hiring a local assistant as a fence against problems, curiosity and damage. If the authorities had developed the film they would have seen another seven works they had not discovered. My landworks deal with nature, history and culture, serving as signs of the importance of these concepts and pointing to the need to preserve what we can for ourselves and the future... Despite the intent of my works to be transient, invisible and spare, they often intrude on official space. Damned if you do and damned if you don't."

Vazan proclaims the imposition of his personal agenda and the situating of his art on the sacred spaces of another culture is not an isolated act; the magazine article affirms that his sidestepping local approval to avoid "a great loss of time and energy" is sanctioned as acceptable in his own community. To say that his "landworks deal with nature, history and culture," smacks of such arrogant stupidity the reader cringes. Desecrating the sacred landscape of a people as a means of "pointing to the need to preserve what we can for ourselves" renders the reader speechless. Nearly. How is it possible for this "community" he addresses, which provides him a forum, to be so disconnected with the larger world?

In support of his intentions, if not their implications, an editorial decision was made by *Canadian Art* both to publish his article and include four photographs of his landforms from those he illegally withheld from the island authorities and smuggled back to Canada. *Canadian Art* is a publicly funded forum. What is to be made of their decision to feature photographs that the Rapanui see as violating the sacredness of their ceremonial and mortuary sites, and that a legally constituted court deemed criminal?

In both the uninformed position that Vazan takes toward the stone clan platforms of the Rapanui, calling them "rubble" mounds, and in the publication of his work in *Canadian Art*, the Rapanui voices sounding on the world stage to assert control over their own ancestral structures and spaces have been overtly and deliberately overridden. In the very real power differential speaking through Vazan's account of his behavior on the island and sanctioned in the public forum, *Canadian Art*, can be seen the necessity to address the sense of entitlement still extant in Canada and across so much of the globe as an imperial legacy. The publication of Vazan's article raises questions about the relations between freedom and responsibility, when art and its celebration enact cultural privilege. Perhaps the Rapanui can forgive, the rest of the world, forget; but possibly in Canada we should keep scratching the wound, hoping to keep it open until it bleeds dry.

In January 2006, we noted an interesting footnote regarding the Rapanui response to Vazan and his *Canadian Art* piece. The site <http://www.iorana.net/noticias.htm> places the words "artist" and "artistic" in quotation marks and thus, with devastating economy, casting on Vazan and his project a well-deserved aura of pretentiousness and triviality. While my Spanish is not great, I feel confident about my understanding of their description of "*la estupidez de Vazin*." Again, wonderfully succinct. Their final statement is as much an indictment of Vazan's Canadian origins (or perhaps I am being solipsistic) as of the man's errant stupidity: "*Ahora, el Gobernador Pakarati solicita que se le prohíba de por vida que retorne a Rapa Nui, lo que es muy prudente, esta claro.*" Now if we can just do something about keeping him away from Peterborough.

See also website:

http://www.canadianart.ca/articles/Articles_details.cfm?

Ref_num=363

And see also the last issue, *RNJ* vol. 19(2) for October 2005, page 149-150, "Vandalism vs. "Conceptual Art."