

Bande à part / Kids these days
Foreman Gallery, Bishop's
University, Lennoxville, Québec
Sept. 10–Dec. 6, 2014
by Edwin Janzen

In a 1989 spoken word performance, former Dead Kennedys frontman Jello Biafra quizzed his audience: “What does the American adult fear more than terrorists?” Answer: “Teenagers!” If perhaps glib, Biafra’s joke also neatly encapsulated adult society’s efforts to define and encircle young people with regulations and institutions. The recent exhibition *Bande à part / Kids these days* confronts and challenges this societal predisposition. The project of Montreal curator Zoë Chan, it brings together eight artists whose works examine adolescent strategies of survival and self-invention amidst our capitalist, industrial society.

But before the visitor to *Bande à part* encounters a single artwork, she is confronted by two complementary, contextualizing installations: a table where people may write their impressions of youth on paper slips and stick them on a designated wall, and a collection of books related in some way to youth. The latter range from Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* to Mary O’Hara’s *My Friend Flicka*, from J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* to *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul*, from S.E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* to Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*, situating the exhibition within a society-wide discourse delimited by psychology, sociology, and youth and adult fiction. With the former – the slips of paper with visitors’ impressions – Chan foregrounds the idea of youth as personal and inscribed, marking the works in the show not as representations of youth but as interlocutions by subjective adult artists.

The written slips of paper also echo certain works in the exhibition. In *Notes* (2004), Kyla Mallett presents large-scale photographs of personal notes passed between high-school girls, which are astonishingly rich in craft and creativity. In sharp contrast to the pre-inscribed fields and formats of today’s Facebook and text messaging apps, the notes’ authors break away easily from the foolscap’s parallel lines, expressing themselves in sketches, spiral text and multiple ink colours. For *coming of age stories 2: booking up* (2014), Kerri Flannigan asked her peers to share stories of their early sexuality, which she then interpreted with illustrations in a diary-like format. Though appearing documentary at first glance, Flannigan’s work is in fact a hybrid representation of an array of uncomfortable but often humorous sketches of sexual exploration.

For *Le beau, le laid et la photographie* (2011), Emmanuelle Léonard invited students at an all-girls school to share their ideas about beautiful and ugly imagery. Filmed sitting at their desks, some of the girls exhibit discomfort with verbal expression, yet their animated facial expressions and gestures acutely convey their struggles to form individualized notions of taste, aesthetics and, thus, identity.

Guillaume Simoneau’s work, *Between Grass and Steel* (2004–11), documents high school students from Lévis, Québec at a rural drinking party on graduation night. Shot as formal portraits, Simoneau’s images evince a tension between official social ritual (graduation) and informal youth ritual (bush party). The graduating girls appear awkward and uncertain, their shadow doubles thrown onto the foliage behind them by the camera flash.

Three works in the exhibition explore music as a means to liberation and self-invention. In *Screaming Girls* (2005), Jo-Anne Balcaen presents a series of found black-and-white clips of screaming female fans at 1960s rock concerts. The video is presented in slow-motion, without an audio track, abstracting the girls from the musical performances they have come to witness and highlighting their ecstatic emotion and abrogation of self-control. Screaming fans like these inaugurated the post-World War II youth culture, and as such represent a break with the past, harbingers of a new reality in the history of adolescent self-invention; you



Helen Reed, still from
Blue Moon, 2014, video.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE
ARTIST

could now be, to quote the Velvet Underground, “saved by rock ‘n’ roll.”

Sarah Febbraro and Althea Thauberger’s works tap this youth tradition of self-inscription through popular music. For *Minor Threats* (2012), Febbraro asked six amateur musicians each to select and learn a guitar solo from YouTube. She then filmed their performances in public locations, juxtaposing each musician’s clip against the footage of her online “tutor.” Recalling the now-defunct tradition of the social “debut,” *Minor Threats* underscores the emotionally charged threshold between being and performing in private and in public. Thauberger’s video, *Songstress* (2002), presents a series of amateur female singer-songwriters performing their own works against lush garden backgrounds. The young performers appear earnest and vulnerable, some of them fidgeting nervously, awkwardly playing with the foliage. Staged but not edited – the singing of birds and crickets is audible throughout – the authenticity of these performances contrasts sharply with today’s intensively edited, packaged and marketed youth culture.

Blue Moon (2014), a documentary-style video by Helen Reed, presents a teenage “wolf pack,” whose high school-age members adopt and perform a variety of lupine identities and rituals. Ill-served by mainstream institutions and religion, pack members draw from nature documentaries and popular conceptions of werewolves to create a new social milieu for themselves. Positioned toward the rear of the gallery, the visitor experiences Reed’s work as a kind of finale – and not inappropriately: the wolf pack is a sophisticated exercise in collective identity-making, perhaps a step beyond the individualized approaches explored in the other works. It’s not merely another youth gang, but an intentional community.

A key feature of *Bande à part* is the absence (excepting the interlocutions of the artists) of adults. Though but one among many of the books mentioned earlier, the spirit of Margaret Mead wafts about this exhibition; indeed, Chan’s curatorial statement, while acknowledging Mead’s failings, defends her importance, in particular the insight that “industrialized societies no longer had collectively agreed-upon rituals marking the passage from childhood to adulthood.” And such rituals as we do have – key coming-of-age markers entitling us to drive motor vehicles and purchase alcohol – signify an inauguration into the realms of consumerism and addiction, though surely not to maturity.

Whether experienced inside or outside of institutional frameworks – such as the nuclear family, school or religion – negotiating adolescence in the labyrinthine context of industrial capitalism demands complex wayfinding strategies. Yet, even in a culture marked by dead ends like crass consumption, social alienation, self-destructive trajectories, young people continue to develop individual and collective creative strategies for survival and identity formation. As the artists in *Bande à part* show us, necessity is the mother of self-invention.

Born in Winnipeg and based in Montreal, visual artist **Edwin Janzen** works in digital imaging, installation and other media.

Queering Citizenship Satellite Gallery, Vancouver May 16 – June 28, 2014 by Maeve Hanna

Curated by Derrick Chang, *Queering Citizenship* features works by Kevin Madill, Francisco-Fernando Granados, Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, Alize Zorlutuna, Igor Grubić, Naufús Ramirez-Figueroa, Emily Roysdon, Pascal Lièvre and Benny Nemerofsky Ramsay. Taking as its catalyst the terms “queer” and “citizenship” as primary means to examine the struggle against the unresolved status of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered individuals, *Queering Citizenship* offers an opportunity to shift perspectives on notions of belonging within the existing binary of “gay-friendly” and “homophobic” societies. Incorporating both aural and visual works, this thoughtfully and critically curated exhibition creates a space where one can contemplate the relationship between queer identity and citizen of place.