

COLUMN

Corporate  
Money  
Laundering  
Through  
the  
ARTS

# Strategic Manœuvres

by Oliver Kellhammer

**D**uring this past year, considerable controversy surrounding the corporate funding of art events has come to the forefront of the mainstream Canadian press. The fracas surrounding the exhibition of Hans Haacke's *Voici Alcan* at the new National Gallery as well as the passing of Bill C-51, prohibiting cigarette advertising at cultural events, provoked unprecedented headlines. Shell Canada's cynical sponsorship of the mammoth exhibition of stolen native and Inuit artifacts entitled *The Spirit Sings* while they simultaneously assisted in the slow ethnocide of Alberta's Lubicon tribe was, of course, outrageous enough to garner media attention. Add to this the passing of the socio-economically ham-fisted free trade agreement to which Canadian progressive organizations and cultural groups were almost unanimously opposed and one realizes that we have experienced a tumultuous year.

In keeping with the Tories' Orwellian policy of economic "rationalization" (some call it bifurcation, i.e. into rich and

poor) government support has, according to the *Globe & Mail*, "either been decreasing or kept at a plateau since (the Tories) slashed \$85 million from the cultural budget in 1984."<sup>1</sup> This shortfall, coupled with an exponentially increasing level of Canadian artistic activity, and an equally steady increase in the curatorial aspirations of our art institutions, has understandably resulted in a gaping financial vacuum. Enter the multi-national corporation. With the rustling of funding dollars in one hand and a shiny new marketing plan in the other, the corporate advertising and sponsorship manager finds an eager audience in the already hard-pressed cultural sector. In fact such support has already become indispensable to our National Gallery. Regarding the mounting of the upcoming Survey of Contemporary Canadian Art exhibition, a gallery spokesperson was quoted as saying that "this exhibition could not be realized without Xerox's (a large American multinational) help."<sup>2</sup> Under the guise of charity, the corporation sponsors the

event, the fund-raiser gets out from between "a rock and a hard place" and we all get that nice warm fuzzy, feeling of seeing yet another "world class," "block-buster" exhibition happening in our very own back yard. This wonderful private sector support, which we cultural types are constantly being urged to pursue, is being presented to us as a virtual panacea by governments and corporations alike. It is seen as the means to justify the slow strangulation of the Canada Council in the name of deficit reduction and trimming the fat while simultaneously promising a thriving artistic climate nurtured in the unfettered bosom of the marketplace. But this utopian symbiosis is as unattainable in the present context of (late) state capitalism as is that ultimate of oxymorons—the free market. As we have all known since early childhood, nothing in a marketplace is free.

Arts sponsorship funds are generally allocated from the advertising and public relations budgets of corporations because, in the words of one major corporate



communications manager, "We try to get (our) value back from it."<sup>3</sup> In this way corporate sponsorships implicate their funding recipients in the corporation's advertising process: implying a considerable level of advocacy by the recipient on the corporation's behalf. This might not be so inherently evil except that it is those very corporations with the biggest image problems that are most in need of the redemptive publicity afforded by advertising themselves in alliance with a major art event. And how does a corporation get these public image problems in the first place? This is achieved primarily through unflattering media coverage of such corporate activities as: use and/or endorsement of violence, exploitation of workers through the denial of basic human rights, defrauding the consumer, contamination of the environment, involvement in government corruption scandals and various other nasty forms of behaviour.

At this point, I would hasten to add that some corporations *are* making a concerted effort to be more socially and environmentally responsible. They should be noted and publicly commended for doing so. In the U.S., with its long history of corporate arts sponsorship, fairly comprehensive "good-guy" lists can be obtained from any of the various ethical investment advocacy groups. Notable among these groups is Peacenet (3228 Sacramento St., San Francisco, CA/94115) which distributes such lists on frequently updated consumer diskettes. I have as yet been unable to locate any comparable lists specifically detailing Canadian corporations, but in view of the post free trade American multinational absorption of our economy, this might well become a moot point. The periodicals section of any large public library is a very good place to start, since most of the more flagrant corporate violators are adequately represented in the public record. If they employed such tools with diligence, cultural fund-raisers could make a real difference to this whole sticky question of the arts tacitly advocating the activities of such corporations. There are indications in the U.S. that at least some fund-raisers are beginning to pay more than just lip service to the ethical history of their corporate sponsors. Back here in

Canada however, with our sparse history of substantial corporate arts support and our traditional reliance on arms-length government funding bodies, such scrutiny of corporate practices is not yet common. It is not surprising then that many of our leading art institutions have allowed the funding gap—caused by deteriorating government support—to be filled with the help of some of the world's most nefarious corporations. For the record, I believe it would be useful to present a brief summary of some of the more blatant examples of mega-corporate money-laundering in connection with recent major Canadian art exhibitions.

### THE "BAD GUYS"

Perhaps the most repugnant sector of the corporate world is the one which participates in and profits from organized repression and the denial of basic human rights. This is usually achieved by foreign subsidiaries operating in the world's many police states, but is also quite apparent right here at home. In this first category, we can easily place Shell Canada and Alcan; both huge multinationals with a long and sorry record of involvement in racist South Africa. Also implicated is the much smaller Toronto-based Fleck Manufacturing Corporation.

### Shell Canada

The case against Shell Canada is well documented. Royal Dutch Shell, Shell Canada's parent company, is instrumental in fueling South Africa's brutal apartheid regime. It also co-owns such notorious facilities as the Tietspruit coal mine, where armed guards have been used to force striking workers back to work. On the domestic front Shell Canada, in the words of Bernard Ominayak, chief of Alberta's Lubicon band, is "actively seeking to destroy our aboriginal lands and way of life"<sup>4</sup> through oil exploration and drilling activities. The Lubicon's land claim has been drawn out by the industry-backed Canadian government for almost 50 years, in a slow war of attrition against a dwindling indigenous culture. In this light, Shell Canada's sponsorship of the 2.1 million dollar native and Inuit artifact exhibition *The Spirit Sings—Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples*,

was a truly contemptible propaganda ploy. It was clearly designed to divert public awareness from Shell's *real* corporate agenda which promotes the subjugation of both native Canadians and South African black workers. Just what any native spirit would be singing after this abuse of their cultural heritage would be an interesting topic for conjecture. Fortunately, not everyone was taken in by the glossy publicity. Widespread boycotts against *The Spirit Sings* were initiated by the Lubicon and other native bands and supported by the Canadian Ethnology Society, several prestigious European museums and numerous national and international aboriginal advocacy organizations. While these boycotts were insufficient to stop the exhibition in its tracks, they did much to raise the public consciousness of Shell Canada's dirty deeds and spur the desire to look deeper into the motivations behind their cultural funding efforts.

## Alcan

Alcan Aluminium is a major funder of many Canadian arts groups and events. Alcan's Canadian labour relations have at times been characterized by some pretty heavy-handed tactics including the use of paid strike-breakers and "police helicopters (which) rained tear gas bombs on strikers" during the 1976 strike at Arvida, Quebec.<sup>5</sup> Up until 1986, when the mounting outrage of shareholders forced them to divest, Alcan owned a 25 per cent interest in a South African subsidiary called Hulett's Aluminium PLC. Designated a "keypoint" (strategic) industry by the South African government, Hulett's output of specialized aluminium products for the South African police and military clearly did (and still does) contribute to the perpetuation of the brutally repressive apartheid regime. Hulett's pays its black workers below the poverty line and refuses to recognize a trade union formed by them. There were allegations from Alcan's own shareholders that Hulett's was training employee militia units and storing weapons on its premises for possible use against a worker insurrection. A representative from Hulett's sits on the South African Defence Advisory Board.<sup>6</sup>

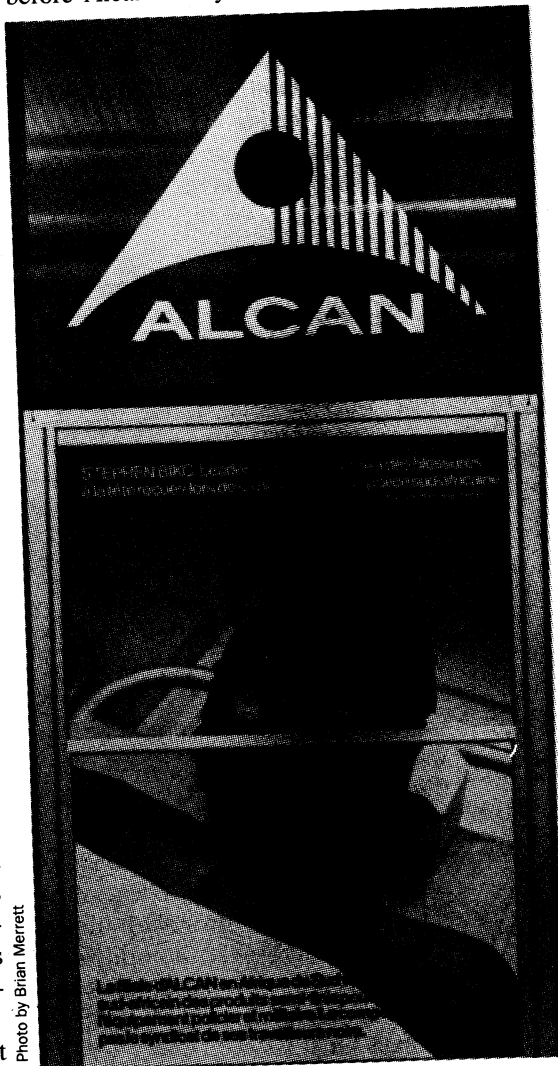
Although Alcan now declares that it

no longer has anything to do with its South African apartheid-loving affiliate; as recently as a few months before the shareholder instigated pullout, Alcan's Canadian spokesperson was quoted as saying that "Alcan has no plans to divest itself of its interest in Hulett's Aluminium...its presence there is helping to *improve* conditions for black workers" and that "Alcan divests only where an investment no longer suits its business purposes."<sup>7</sup>

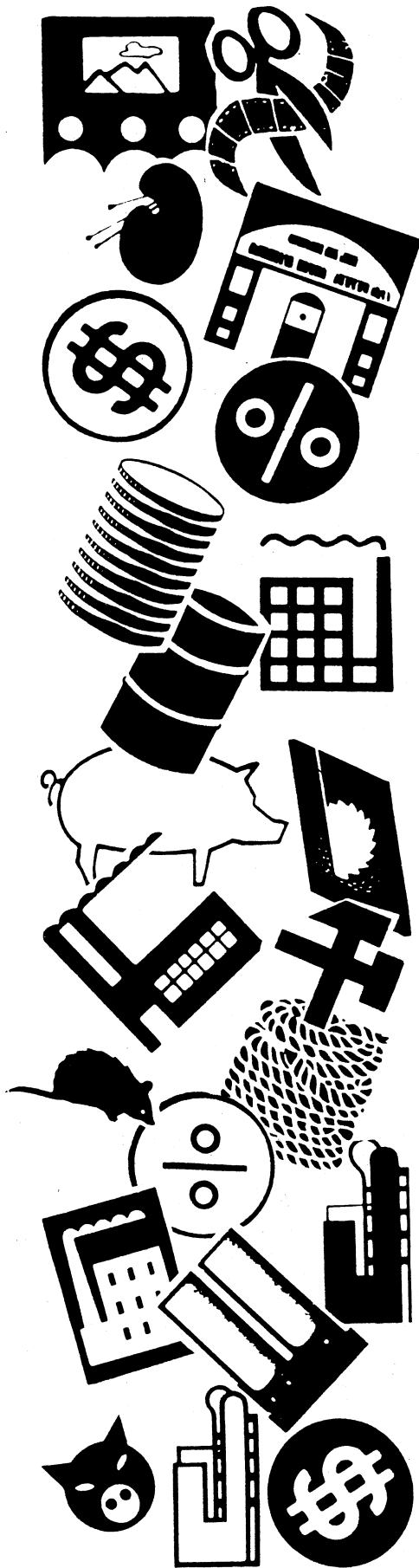
In this light, it is strangely ironic to witness the outrage voiced by Alcan spokespeople over the exhibition of Hans Haacke's work *Voici Alcan* at the new National Gallery. Haacke's piece, which contains an image of Stephen Biko in the morgue juxtaposed with text (prepared by Haacke and derived from material on public record) about Alcan and South Africa, had been shown several times before Alcan finally unleashed its dia-

tribe over the 1988 showing. Declaring Haacke a "pseudo-artist...portraying Alcan as a bunch of murderers and thugs" and denouncing the National Gallery as "having gone along with libel,"<sup>8</sup> Alcan staff hurriedly tried to mend this chink in their public relations armour. This was after all the brand new, highly publicized, multi-million dollar National Gallery—the perfect place to propagate public amnesia over a sorry corporate record. Inexplicably, even *Globe & Mail* critic J.B. Mays got into the act, denouncing Haacke's work as "undocumented gossip" and "tittle-tattle"<sup>9</sup> in a manner that was clearly defensive of the corporation. Whether by this Mays was merely trying to secure his place in the wine and cheese line of future gala corporate openings is up for debate, but I must say I found his stance truly disturbing.

It is however to the National Gallery's credit that members of its staff have gone



"...portraying Alcan as a bunch of murderers and thugs": detail from Hans Haacke's *Voici Alcan*.



on public record as saying that the larger issues surrounding the exhibition of Haacke's piece were "relevant" and that it "recognized the importance of the debate (over the issue of corporate sponsorship.)"<sup>10</sup>

## Fleck Manufacturing

A third player in this sordid saga of image laundering by corporate violators of human rights can be found in the history of Ontario's Fleck Manufacturing Corporation. Fleck Mfg., although nowhere near the size of Alcan or Shell, nevertheless takes pride in being one of the key contributors to Toronto gallery THE Power Plant's "capital" campaign. This means that Fleck Mfg. has donated enough money to get a part of the building named after them, in this case the Fleck Clerestory, which graces the upper reaches of the gallery. In return for this munificence, the name "Fleck" gets associated with any work shown in that part of the building, swaddling exhibiting artists in that warm feeling of corporate support and lending that certain air of avant-garde sophistication and cultural benefaction to the corporation's public identity.

But who is this Fleck Manufacturing Corporation anyway? Looking back to the spring of 1978 we will recall quite a different face of Fleck. This was the year that 81 women employees at Fleck's rat-infested Centralia, Ontario automotive wiring plant began a strike which was to become a landmark event in Ontario women's labour history, noted for the unprecedented use of government sponsored police intervention to break the strike. Although hardly a strategic industry as in the case of Shell and Alcan in South Africa, Fleck Mfg. was 50 per cent owned by the then Deputy Minister of Industry and Tourism, James Fleck, through his wife and children. (Incidentally, James's brother is the infamous Paul Fleck who, during his tenure as president of the Ontario College of Art, attempted to put down a strike by models and other college staff by bringing in outside security personnel. He is now serving as the president of the Banff Centre for Fine Art.)

Even before the Fleck workers actually went on strike (and they had never been on strike before) the Ontario Provincial Police were brought into the plant to intimidate them. In order to ensure that scab labour could continue to operate the antiquated Fleck facility, the O.P.P. (according to its own figures) spent over \$1.2 million to continuously maintain a presence of from 40 to 500 officers at the picket line.<sup>11</sup> At that time, 500 officers represented about 10 per cent of the total O.P.P. forces in the province. Violence broke out repeatedly with police in riot gear "jabbing women in the breasts and stomach" and "clubbing another striker unconscious"<sup>12</sup> and inflicting numerous other personal injuries.

It is interesting to note that the workers of Fleck Manufacturing were not striking primarily over their unbelievably poor working conditions which, in addition to the aforementioned rats, included: improperly maintained machinery that repeatedly burned the workers, dust levels high enough to cause headaches and sinus problems, lack of basic climate control and the absence of adequate wash-room facilities. The central reason for this strike was simply to get Fleck to acknowledge the workers' right to organize a union and to negotiate a first contract. This did not occur in distant South Africa. Fleck's brutal response to this strike was an unequivocal indication of a blatant disregard for the basic human rights of rural Ontario women workers and should be deplored as much as the activities of Alcan and Shell.

As a footnote; in December of 1988, in response to a planned strike and to the "new realities" imposed by the free trade agreement, Fleck Manufacturing shut the doors of its plant forever and moved all of its machinery to a duty-free manufacturing zone in Mexico, known as a "maquiladora." The average wage in this zone is about \$4.25 a day and here trade unions, safety and environmental standards are discouraged and ineffectual.<sup>13</sup> Over 200 jobs were permanently lost in Canada as a result of this closure and subsequent move to Mexico.

