

## **AGENCIES AND INVENTORIES**

### **An Artist and her Microscope**

**Andrew James Paterson**

*Having to prove yourself to everyone will victimize you a great deal in your life. You will find yourself upset when others don't notice you enough or when they disapprove of you, or most victimizingly, when they don't understand you. Consequently, you will strive even harder to get them to understand, and when they see that you are doing this, they will be able to exercise even more power over you.*

—Susan Kealey, from an untitled artwork, 1996

Susan Kealey was a truly interdisciplinary artist. Her resources and practice encompassed photography, sculptural construction, painting, critical and ficto-critical writing, editing, performance, video, and audio-collage. Many of her creations nonchalantly blurred disciplines into and onto each other, yet Susan was far too rigorous to ever be accused of flippancy. For her, words and sounds were pictures, and images were gestures as well as words. Kealey rejected entrenched purist separations between visual and verbal languages and language systems, while always respecting the formal properties of her chosen materials.

The textual composition quoted at the top of this essay is as visual as it is richly verbal. The artist uses words to present pictures, and clearly articulates a keen grasp of how those perceiving themselves to possess power maintain an effective dynamic by constantly placing those considered inferior on the defensive. For Susan, defensiveness, or victim status, was to be avoided at all costs.

Actually, Susan Kealey was not the author of this verbal passage. Rather, she lifted or “appropriated” it from a mass-marketed self-help booklet. To Kealey, the clichéd language of self-help literature registers as a form of found poetry, and there is dignity to be found in its banal prose. Despite this passage’s source within the contradictory politics of the various empowerment and recovery movements, Susan uses it to create a verbal picture worthy of framing.

**One can see who is speaking,  
without having to identify the speaker.**

The notion of inventory, with its methods, practices, and knowledge of systems and thought patterns, is ever-present throughout her practice. Kealey was classified legally blind or visually impaired while still in her early twenties; seeing and then retaining were performative actions for her. Inventories and systems were delights as well as assignments. Her body of work is certifiably scientific yet devoid of quasi-objective disdain for any sensual and emotional repercussions emanating from particular images, objects, or words.

After graduating from the Ontario College of Art, Susan quickly became a presence within Toronto's artist-run centres. These centres are non-profit or "parallel" galleries funded by governmental cultural agencies and programmed by boards of directors or exhibition committees consisting of practising artists/volunteers. By the late eighties, "parallel," public, and even private galleries had become focused on the ramifications of inclusion and identity politics. The art-market boom of the early eighties had been seriously deflated in tandem with a perilous North American economy. Many artists and artistic "communities" were demanding their rightful places at the table. The AIDS pandemic was ravishing bodies left and right while begging questions of what indeed might be the functions and/or values of art in the midst of an epidemic.

Programmers and exhibitors within local, national, and international art communities strained to satisfy what were perceived, often by competing individuals or factions, to be correct or appropriate criteria. Too many exhibition decisions were being made on the basis of candidates' identities rather than on their actual work, and content was all too often privileged at the expense of form. The radical left, unfortunately not unlike the late-capitalist right, disdained history. Many galleries and artists' collectives became overwhelmingly preoccupied with immediate issues or crises, and thus neglected to consider broader perspectives. Many of those same galleries came to function primarily as service organizations, accommodating competing interest groups and individuals rather than initiating and presenting solid, effective programming themselves.

As an arts administrator, editor, and practising artist who believed in the complex

interweaving of form and content, Susan Kealey took inventory and was frustrated. She understood all too well that evoking victim status and/or privilege might prove a successful short-term strategy for some, but that such a strategy only mimicked and reinforced entrenched power dynamics while ultimately limiting agency. Both distance and analysis were necessary, and a visiting artist's residency was exactly what the doctor ordered.

### Case Histories<sup>1</sup>

I am interested in the public and private aspects of institutions and language. As my background is in philosophy and translation, my practice revolves more around an investigation and recontextualization of existing objects and texts than in the formal "making" of things.<sup>2</sup>

During 1990–91, Susan Kealey participated in an artists' residency at Akademie Schloss Solitude, a complex of artists' studios located outside of the German city of Stuttgart. In the Black Forest nearby, Kealey discovered a former tuberculosis clinic. Examining its abandoned solarium as an archaeological site, she recovered eighty original patient plaques, which marked each patient's place on the sweeping balcony. Prior to the development of a tuberculosis vaccine, patients were treated with fresh air and intensive rest. Lung infection was associated with urban squalor and pollution, and patients were relocated to idyllic rural or "natural" environments for their convalescence.

Kealey combined her intervention involving the original plaques with photographs of the outdoor solarium and documentation of other remaining fixtures such as lounges, canopies, and radio switches. Cibachromes of lung-tissue slides provided by the clinic were mounted in tandem with small Duratrans of photographs taken of the Akademie's interiors, cropped like X-rays.<sup>3</sup>

Within the installation *Case Histories*, Kealey studiously itemizes the parallel architectures of the solarium and the artist-studio complex. The latter is itself built and structured not unlike a clinic, and it is also an institution, with a rich and convoluted history. During the Second World War, the hospital was used as a school for Nazi Youth: critic Nancy Shaw writes that "in this pastoral setting, nationalist principles based on racism and genocide were to be realized through