

Agitating Art

Evan Webber

Action Terroriste Socialement Acceptable creates ecoactivists in an afternoon.

THE STILL IMAGE of an exploding SUV bathed our faces in orange light, but no sound came through the speakers. While Pierre shook his head, Annie stood in front of the audience, hands on hips, as if she could will the video equipment to work. Pierre Allard and Annie Roy are Action Terroriste Socialement Acceptable (ATSA), a Montreal-based "organism" with the goal of creating works that make "not just inhabitants, but citizens." Defining ATSA's work as art or activism would miss the point. For its creators, art and activism are indivisible.

The duo was in Toronto as part of the 2006 Free Fall Festival of experimental theatre. I was taking my basic training with about 70 other nervous attendees at The Theatre Centre. That done, we would all participate in *Attack #12*, advancing efforts to rid Toronto's streets of energy-sucking vehicles ... providing Pierre and Anna could get the training video to play.

As Pierre suggested, "Maybe we could just narrate the event," the speakers burst to life. On screen, a dizzying montage of dead fish, burning oil wells and gleaming all-terrain vehicles accompanied the blaring music. We were watching archival footage of ATSA's 2003 performance, *Attack #1*.

Attack #12 promised to be more

subtle. After our indoctrination session at The Theatre Centre, the attendees would spread out and distribute 1200 "Statements of Offence." Pierre instructed us to slip these traffic ticket-like notices of environmental violations behind the windshield wipers of vehicles that were idling, started by remote control, ill-maintained or needlessly oversized and fuel-inefficient. The statements were individually numbered and printed in triplicate. One copy would go on the offending vehicle, another would be posted on the gallery wall at the YYZ Artist's Outlet, where we would all meet later that afternoon, and the final copy would be sent to ATSA's headquarters in Montreal.


The presentation over, we stood in line to pick up our allotment of tickets. About a third of the attendees quietly backed out of the room, mumbling apologies and encouragement. Unperturbed by the thinning crowd, Annie told us, "Please wear your hats, don't get too cold." Meanwhile, Pierre assumed the impassive mask of a military commander. "Good luck," he said, as we filed past him, through the doors and on to the street.

It was February 3, 2006. Toronto wilted under the power of an unseasonable thaw and a soundless, depressing drizzle. But we had a lot of tickets to distribute, so we strode off bravely.

Attack #10, staged in Montreal, had been a much larger affair. Over the course of a month, "performers," like us, handed out 10,000 tickets. Media attention exceeded ATSA's expectations, but in the aftermath, the stream of letters from community supporters suggested the campaign caused widespread confusion, as well as education. Most surprising though, was the number of offenders who called ATSA to find out how much money they owed. Attacks of various kinds have also been staged in Quebec City and Ottawa.

Although there was no shortage of offenders, after two hours the novelty had worn off. With no tickets left, we wound our way to the intersection of Richmond Street and Spadina Avenue. At YYZ, we nodded hellos to fellow performers, glad to come in from the damp cold. As we rubbed our hands to get the blood flowing, organizers added our tickets to those already posted on the gallery's open wall space.

People held their babies and talked quietly. Little kids drank hot chocolate with their mittens still on. Walking home that afternoon, I mulled over what effect our antics might have. It wasn't until a few days later that it occurred to me that ATSA's brilliance wasn't its rhetoric or the visual cleverness. Instead, the amazing thing was Pierre and Annie's ability to take a group of civilians and after half an hour, mobilize them into a force of activists. In other words, it was us. We'd handed out all 1200 tickets.

Back at The Theatre Centre, artistic director Franco Boni found himself dodging complaints about the *Attack #1* video which had been playing in a loop on a screen set up in the theatre's front window. Unperturbed by the naysayers, Franco explained, "It's art. It's supposed to agitate. It's not supposed to just feel good." Next, he invited ATSA to come back to Toronto to work on a new project. 

Evan Webber is a performer and theatre creator based in Toronto.



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