

VISUAL ARTS » REVIEW

In time for the G20, some constructive anarchy



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ATSA AT TORONTO FREE GALLERY

Until July 24, 1277 Bloor St. W.,
 Toronto
 (www.torontofreegallery.org)

Fed up with the G8/G20? Feeling disempowered, cynical, furious or just bored by all the empty bluster? Have I got a show for you. At Toronto Free Gallery, you can see what a decade's worth of art depicting real political action, actual "bread to the hungry, blankets to the cold," looks like.

Change: Works 1997-2009 is a survey of accessibly priced art works, photographic records of public interventions, performances on video and documents from relational exchanges (that is, projects with public participation) by the Montreal-based collective known as ATSA (Action Terroriste Socialement Acceptable) – a team composed of co-founders Annie Roy and Pierre Allard, plus dozens of other artists, designers and activists.

While borne out of the anarchist/Marxist tradition, ATSA's oeuvre is much smarter, not hidebound by outdated doctrine, and way more fun. ATSA wants viewers to re-engage with, not simply smash, our consumer-driven society, and then improve said society by rearranging the rules of the cash nexus.

To ATSA, destruction is ultimately a limited response. Rather, the collective inspires constructive, smartass questioning of societal and economic norms, followed by real-life, real-time helping of others. Although many of the events/works in this collection may look rough, chaotic and, at times, dangerous, ATSA's projects always pay close attention to larger social and (more important for an art gallery) aesthetic ramifications.



ATSA's pink Bubblegum Cannonballs, arranged among the cannons at the El Morro fortress in Havana, were meant to be both playful and frightening. SIMON BUJOLD

Among the many actions documented here, my favourites are *La Banque a' Bas*, from 1997, an automated teller machine constructed out of used oven doors. Instead of money, the oven ATM was stocked with socks and hot soup for the homeless. Left outside Montreal's Musée d'Art Contemporain in the dead of winter, the "bank" distributed tens of thousands of meals and pairs of socks before the authorities finally ordered it removed. At Toronto Free Gallery, the action is commemorated by one of the original stove doors, the window of which frames a photo from the event.

My second favourite is a large, Plexiglas-covered photograph from a public sculpture, entitled *Bubblegum Cannonballs*, mounted in Havana in 2009. Using the famed El Morro fortress as a backdrop, ATSA stacked hot-pink cannonballs into a battle-ready pyramid and scattered a few of the pretty weapons up and down the fortress steps. In the photograph, children frolic around the killing devices, drawn by their babyish tint. The image is both playful and frightening, and asks how colour-coding of weaponry (metallic greys, cold blacks, dark greens) factors into the psychology of violence.

Some viewers may find Change too didactic. I'll admit when I first saw this retrospective in Montreal, I was overwhelmed – there's a lot of text on the walls. So I advise two approaches: Set aside 45 minutes and be patient – the show is more resonant and funny when you understand the actions documented; or take the butterfly approach and learn about whatever grabs your eye.

Either way, Change inspires. Despite being surrounded by a billion dollars worth of G20 high-handedness, you'll realize that all it takes to make a difference are some junkyard props and a lot of heart.