

Denise o ,
[Massachusetts](#)
[Museum of Contemporary Art](#)
 , has been where no
 has been before: on a three-year
 trek to look at work
 . In
 a world that chases the exotic along
 with the new, she was determined to suss
 out what attracted her to work

. “Oh, ,” she would think,
 discovering yet another “secret ”:
 “Why,” she wondered, “do I know more
 ?”

“[Oh, Canada,](#)”

, is the result of her marathon,

.
 Trying to tackle a whole was a
 ridiculous task, she acknowledges, but
 it could be done. Her essay in the 400-
 page catalogue, due out in July, is titled
 “O : Or,

” To visit the number
 she saw, to travel the number of
 miles she covered, in good and famously
 bad weather, and to spend the amount of
 time she devoted to immersing herself in
 all things would appear to be
 little less than a personal quest, if not an
 obsession.

Yes, it was personal, the 36-year-old
 said on the day “O ” opened, and
 the show does offer the take of one ,
 “a snapshot that will spark a dialogue
 continuing well after the exhibition is
 packed in boxes.” The curiosity that led her
 to undertake the task of enlarging the view
 and
 beyond is matched only by her ambition

and courage. Walking into the first
 event of the opening weekend, a private
 viewing hosted by the director, Joseph
 Thompson, and trustees
 and sponsored by the Consulate General
 , could have seemed
 like tiptoeing into the lion’s den. More
 than 300 discerning and critical denizens
 of the Canadian art world were on hand—

to celebrate (and, let’s
 admit it, assess) the results of her odyssey
 of discovery.

A lot was riding on both sides. For the
 assembled , expectations were
 running high for what has been billed
 as “the largest survey

ever produced outside
 ,” and many would have ideas about
 how it could have been done differently.
 Among the more than 120 works on view,
 few are by current stars, while
 many are by relative unknowns; this is
 something o did purposefully to
 give a broader, more catholic experience
 , one that goes
 beyond the usual suspects who have come
 to dominate the scene internationally.
 The [Cedar Tavern Singers](#)

sang wittily
 in the lobby about what was on people’s
 minds: o ’s choices. “What’s
 in store? / Beyond those doors?” they
 crooned. “What exactly is /

is shrouded in mystery / Is it
 Maybe post-ironic hockey?”
 Maybe it is post-ironic to think of
 as an unknown quantity.
 It is arguable that enjoy
 more exposure and better rapport

, where they increasingly find success. The successful who live and work, or are otherwise recognized, seem to be absorbed into the big embrace

. But o , in her catalogue essay, has a point to make about this, too: "So is this lack of knowledge a result of the fact that identity assimilates into the internal or me ,

? Or is it the sense of not really promoting oneself outside ?" She believes "it is most likely a mixture" of both. In this case, though, is vigorously promoting itself by supporting initiative and its endeavour to start a dialogue

The world showed its support by turning out in force. An appreciable level of excitement and pleasure was palpable at the preview-night party as people who have had long associations, but see each other infrequently, greeted each other. man,

, put it well at a council-hosted event the morning . "How rare it is for us in the visual arts to come together in this way," Sirman said. "It almost never happens within ; it usually happens in some neutral territory far away where we can overcome our territoriality." He remarked that support

, "is an important undertaking council at a time under stress." "Tens and tens of thousands of people will be able to experience "

during the year that "O" is on , he said. The

reclaimed red-brick industrial buildings, has an annual attendance of 120,000.

Now, what about the ? Although the installation left much to be desired, o achieved her goal of presenting so that it is illuminated by the context . It might be difficult to define what is , but in many ways the show looks and feels .

Why is this so, and why is it so tempting to follow the observation with "whatever that is"? Markonish outlines themes that arise from the work she selected for the show: landscape and its powerful hold on the psyche, the dread and creeping horror of the uncanny, aboriginal histories and the effects of colonialism on

peoples, traditions of storytelling, the idea of North, identity issues and the hyphenated , a return to craft and making in studio practice, transformation and the grotesque, conceptualism, that much-vaunted humour and more.

To these themes I would add an ever-present awareness of mortality, an aspect of the experience of landscape and death by climate or wilderness; the magical animal Other; a strong penchant for cultural critique; and, especially in our theory- and tech-savvy country, the mediation of nature and human experience by technology.

But o proves to be a perceptive outsider. She has caught on to something that is going on , especially among its younger , who with confidence and awareness of the larger world seem to find their identities and what they need to sustain themselves in the places where they are, rather than seeking to define themselves in relation

to some notion of a dominant centre that is far away and divorced from their immediate experience. Their attention can be focused inward and outward at the same time, showing the possibility for a true *it*. Perhaps cosmopolitanism is indeed the essential ingredient of the elusive *identity*. In some ways, our *to be* catching up to our *in their* appreciation of vernacular and the cogent particularities of place.

Stack *o*'s themes one upon the other and a complex, multi-dimensional picture, a dense web of associations, begins to emerge, amplified by the conversations that proximity and juxtaposition start up among the works themselves. At times, the threads are as direct as the flapping curtains seen in works

, which point to the instability and porosity of borders as well as the anxiety or tension regarding what is unseen or only partially revealed outside the window or the frame. Varieties of ecstatic experience are present in

. Death and remembrance are underlying presences in numerous works,

punctuates with a sharp, affecting moment, all the more powerful because of its lack of guile. An account of connections like these among this diverse array of works could go on and on.

There isn't space here to get deeply into individual works, but there are many in this show that would reward the endeavour. An informal poll of several *viewers'* top-five picks on opening weekend produced a different list each time. The

sample was small, and the poll a kind of game, but the responses appear to indicate more than the simple rubric that "there is something for everyone" in *o*'s show. Whether all of the work on view is to everyone's taste seems beside the point. Her exhibition has the right stuff to demand the full attention and absorption of a slow read. She has given the viewers of "*O*" a rich field for investigation that is full of nuances and complexities which it might take a while to see and comprehend. Our appropriate immediate response *to her thoughtful* and ambitious *work might just* be "thank you."

AN ODE: O, SHE DREAMS OF WHOLENESS
(A REDUCTION, WITH SPAM ADDED)

Tackling	over
A whole	the psyche.
O.	Your true dreams.
	Transformation,
oh!	Humour,
I beg mercy sir.	Wh(oh)leness
Or, how I learned to love.	and Techno
	logy.
*	
	O proves to be
O opened	a perceptive
an exhibition	outsider
in	(she caught on
boxes,	to
enlarging the view.	something
Her	going
Odyssey of discovery	on
(O).	(with
Maybe post-ironic?	confidence
	(and
An unknown quantity:	awareness of
the big embrace.	the limit of
	world)):
But, O, in the catalogue essay	her attention
has a point to make;	focused inward
it's most likely a mixture	and
of nothing,	(oh (oh (oh!))) outward
rock hard in seconds.	at the same time.
	*
["oh."	
"oh!"]	
	Stack O's themes
The world showed its support.	one
"How rare it is for us to come together	upon
like this,	the
this pill is for you".	other:
Under stress,	complex –
"O is	associations –
on",	proximity –
she said.	juxtaposition –
They said, "surf our drugstore".	
An annual attendance of	(And the
00000.	Conversations
Why, this is so—	(with O)).
O.	
	- "O, elusive identity!"
Landscape and its hold	- "O, our vernacular and cogent

particularities!”
- “0, undiminished, discount blue pills!”

The
flapping
curtains,
the instability,
the tension,
the wind000w
and s000 on.

There was an informal poll
on 0’s show:
a whole.
“0.”
Our whole?
“Oh!”
Yes, sweetly lasting,
a pistolling
exchange
and finally
falls
to
a silent
0.

ANODYNE: OR, X OF DEMARCATION
(A REDUCTIXN DEBASEMENT? CUTBACK? CONQUEST?
X LIKENESSES, SIMILARITIES,
EXCHANGES, INSTRUCTIONS, NOISE)

"X is
^ over",
she says.

Steep 40 degree snow brought us down to
a small glacier.

Consider the phrase

X elusive identity.
X vernacular and conclusive particularities.

Tackling an entire country.

There shouldn't be any gaps or open
spaces, you shouldn't be able to see
the back of the frame and the picture
should be straight with its edges aligned
with the edges of the frame.

Imagine an exhibitixn~scene in partitions.

Choose a frame that matches the picture

Crossing the glacier we searched two
possible routes up the ridge but they
both led to drop-offs.

An anonymous quantity

Our route goes up along side the brown
rockfall on the snow then up a steep gully
to hit the ridge crest.

A private trip legitimating X, maybe.

Align the picture so the edges are even.

Very slippery rock brought us to an
exposed slab.

X says,

Annual attendance regarding X.

An exhibition X.

X of fractal terrains.
X of discontinuous selection.

REVIEWED, “ANODYNE: OR, X OF
DEMARCATIION”

“Fractal Terrains 3 ... lets you generate random worlds and fine-tune an infinite number of details for the ultimate in realism.” Just because it lets you doesn’t mean you should. The generation of the X can be a means of travel across social paths at glacial paces, or it can be an evasive tactic. We alter the frame in order to increase the proportion of difficulty to significance. The difficulty of significance is that it often diminishes in relationship to complexity. In some mountain regions or white towns the clustered intensity of day-to-day life produces an effect of duende, which can mean both sadness and innovation, inextricably. By the time we have climbed the steep stairways to the small shelters dug into the hills, we might expect better from the magnificent vista but are too sleepy to do much but drink. Clapping along with the boldest of our uncles when he starts to bark out a tune might glue us harder to our families and as a side benefit frighten passersby. Our expectations diminish with every note, at least of anything beyond the next note. When the party comes to an end we are rendered both exalted and hopeless. Identity is an epiphenomenon of the unstoppable, without which pressure a lump of coal remains a lump of coal. What blue plumb line leads back down to the waiting settlers, who want to purchase authenticity? If you are unable to plunge directly down into the basin of the problem you may not be the metaphysical plumber we were seeking. It’s probably in your overalls that you inspire the most confidence, but in your BVD’s with the aerodynamic stitching we feel the most sympathy. I was in the living room built from sierra marble when the toddler pissed himself because he thought he was too grown up to rush to the toilet. He terraformed the landscape with a yellow pond that represented a topographic variation, but he never saw the map and wouldn’t have recognized his contribution if he did. There has never been a movie called The Baby Who Knew Too Much. By the time the poem has you on the telephone, the emergency is over.

“OR ELSE; A FEAR OF COMMITMENT OR COMMITTING TO DISINGENUOUSNESS”

A land without memory, eh, surface readings through a cartography of the damned. What is this wasteland you chronicle? Wanton tykes with pretensions toward maturity leaving nothing but puddles on the floor; nearby we, the adults, with ennui-fueled malaise drink for further numbness in mountaintop caves with empty bellies and empty minds. Yo, let me flip this one back at you, are we all just waiting for something to happen, a clear voice to ring out and cut through a sea of complacency or at least please the ticket holders.

I’ve got some misgivings about your red herrings; a parallax parable, some D&D realism where the ideas of a marked ‘x’ leaves us soiling both our ballots and our trousers. This dungeon master once read a history of the void that was included in the footnotes of a radio drama Rirkrit Tiravanija wrote, or maybe it was at some frequent flyer coffee meeting with the other big wigs—surely a matter of little consequence. Either way the conversation was fixed on behaving poorly at a banquet where all the food is made of spun-sugar, hollow, essential nothingness; an introduction to some early modern era notion of unwinding after an uptight social gathering, a forerunner of present day dessert, eating the void and acting a fool, but enough of that, it’s bad table manners.

Is ‘or’ our only defense? Skirting all of the shackles of judgment with the gavel in our trembling hands, pensive to a fault. I think the robes are nice but this powdered wig is pretty itchy, and we all do enough head scratching anyway. What was it that Charles Baudelaire said about a pack of grimacing rascals dressed up as carnival-time butchers and washerwomen? You ever think that it might be us after all? Opening false skylights to the heavens, even when all the cameras are at home.

Hey Nancy, if you’re out there, can you end this broken telephone masquerade, where has all the substance gone, a shell or a surface, pure pastiche or a grin without a cat, or... I’m looking for that real shit, commitment, clarity, accountability. Holler if you hear me.

THAT REAL SHIT: A REVIEW OF SAM COTTER'S "OR
ELSE; A FEAR OF COMMITMENT OR COMMITTING TO
DISINGENUOUSNESS"

Part One: 'Eating the Void and Acting a Fool'

The concert was over and my ears were ringing, though not unpleasantly. What you had to say was important, you spoke up. Your stooped posture and vigorous gesticulations made it plain you had something to say. You leaned in. As you spoke your lips sprayed beery spittle. Without embarrassment or apology you seemed to indicate your awareness of the constant spit stream, as if challenging me even to mention it. A little spit or beer spray was neither here nor there, you seemed to say, though your beery spit landed on my face, my glasses, my neck, and my upper chest, which was exposed to the fourth button. You were worried about me, you said. To be perfectly honest you were more concerned about the quality of the artworks that I had already created or might possibly, in the future, once again create. "To be perfectly honest," you said, more than once, giving the phrase special emphasis with a kind of emphatic abandon and a beefy thrust of your chin. To be perfectly honest, you said, it was all right with you if I suffered great pain, illness, and catastrophe, up to but not including death. It pained you to say this, you said, but you thought you positively "needed" me to suffer excruciating pain of the kind associated with chronic and often deadly disorders, but not to kill myself or accidentally to die. You wanted to emphasize, you said, that I was not to die "anytime soon." You assured me you didn't want me to suffer. Unless, you said, extreme emotional and physical distress was a necessary precondition for my production of "greater and greater art." The more you thought about it, you said, you became certain that it was in fact necessary that I suffer, that it would be "better for everyone that way." Though it pained you to say this, you said, you

suspected that I did not have the capability to produce "truly great" artworks unless via the experience of life-threatening illness and excruciating mental or physical torment, yet without committing suicide or otherwise dying, accidentally or not.

Part Two: 'Opening False Skylights to the Heavens'

The train ride had been exhausting. It was too early in the day to find a hostel bed, so I stretched out on the cobblestones of P. Smysl Otakar II Square and fell asleep. Suddenly, my shoulders were shaken and a hand gently, almost girlishly, slapped and brushed at my cheeks. No time had passed at all, or so it seemed. But it was already afternoon. A dense shadow lay across half of the square. Alarmed but half-asleep, I mumbled protests, assuming I was being roused by cops, something I was used to. The boy who smiled at me, though, couldn't have been older than fifteen. He showed all his teeth when he smiled, even his molars. It was a hot July afternoon, but he wore a thick denim coat that, because of its size and the shiny leather strips sewn onto its sleeves, looked more like a bomber jacket. From within its folds he produced a fifth of Ballantine's, a rectangular bottle he seemed to have difficulty holding in one hand. He unscrewed it and tilted it at me, murmuring "you" and "please" repeatedly. We both took deep drinks of Scotch, passing the bottle back and forth in silence. "Your friends," he said. "My friends?" I said skeptically. "I don't know anyone in eské Budjovice," I said. The boy shook his head placidly and said, "Your friends are in the bar." The first bar we went to was just off the square. You took stairs at the back of a used appliance store and went down a bending hallway past a travel agency and a dentist. This bar was thick with cigarette and pipe smoke, though it

held only four people, all very old, very drunk men, who seemed to recognize the boy, whom they called Pavel. With astonishing graciousness and quickness, Pavel extricated us from that bar and then from three more we entered. We didn't stop to drink in the bars, only entering each to look for "your friends" and then leaving quickly, having not found "your friends." On the way to the fifth bar, Pavel held up a finger, as if to test the direction of the wind. I stopped and watched him. "Your friends," he once more said, letting out a ferociously amused bark, like a puppy. I followed him to a neighborhood of immense tan and grey stone apartment buildings, some of them dating to the 19th Century. He ran up the front steps of one and kicked at the massive, austere double wooden doors. A compartment door swung inward. The compartment door was absurdly small in comparison to the doorway, yet even Pavel, who was taller than me, could walk through it without stooping. Once we were inside, Pavel disappeared up the stairwell, almost sprinting. I called after him to wait. Then I started up the stairs. After several flights I waited to see if I could hear Pavel, but I couldn't hear anything at all. I wondered if anyone was in the building, if it was condemned or under reconstruction. I kept climbing and found myself in a gloomy hallway. I walked along slowly, listening at a few doors, wondering if I would see Pavel again soon. I jumped in the air when Pavel kicked down a folding staircase, which made an enormous racket as it descended from the ceiling to the hallway floor. Then we were in a dim attic filled with chests, boxes, old sports equipment, dust. Pavel handed me a burning hash joint. He opened some shutters at the edge of the roof and pointed at the shutters of the next skylight over, around the edges of which gray daylight leaked. Opening them, I climbed up and out, and we smiled at each other from the

sills of adjacent skylights, sitting atop the giant building. It started to rain.
