

CRAIG LEONARD

CASTRO'S LIBRARY

Forms and functions of language lie at the base of much of Craig Leonard's work. When language is obscure, one finds the unexpected. In 2004, for example, Leonard published *Obsolete Concepts: A Locator*, the result of his research into "lost words" in the English language. So *Inkhornism* is succinctly defined as "a learned or pedantic word or expression; an ink-horn term or phrase," while *priggism* is the word for professional thievery or roguery, with an example given from Fielding (1743), "The Life of Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great I. iii: An undeniable testimony of the great antiquity of Priggism." Other wonderful examples include *putation* as (1) the pruning or trimming of trees, and (2) the action of considering or reckoning; supposition, estimation. Or we have *rhetorism*, that is, rhetorical action, as in Sanford's translation (1569) of Agrippa's "Of the Vanity and Uncertainty of the Artes and Sciences xi: Of rhetorisme, or of the Rhetoricall Daunsinge." As Leonard points out in his prologue, for the Editors of the Oxford English Dictionary, "the application of the category 'obsolete' (*obs.*) refers to words that have been out of use since roughly 1800; yet, interestingly, they are not 'old-fashioned' enough to warrant categorisation as *ARCHAIC*, which is the label that defines 'an attachment to an earlier period'. To be obsolete then is to be less dead than dormant, though doubtless closer to the grave than to a renaissance." *Obsolete Concepts* gives a new life to these words but also reflects on the lineage of language itself, and our necessary involvement with its evolution.

Craig Leonard is intrigued by words, and not above the long slog of research needed to follow through on a hunch. No antiquarian, he delights in surprise and juxtaposition, for example concocting a bilingual book of poems by Odette Vioget (1901-1938?) along with a listing of the contents of her (imagined) library and an introduction to the book by R. Oelze (Berlin 1937) "translated" from the German by Leonard himself. Or for an exhibition in 2003 at Stauffer Library, Queen's University, where he had completed an undergraduate degree in English, Leonard combed through the Canadian literature section to find all the books that had been untouched for fifty to one hundred years, as evidenced in their circulation cards. After so long a wait, unread, he brought them out of their obscurity for exhibition in the library's main hall.

Not all of Leonard's work is print-based. Since 2001 he has done a number of audio projects, in collaboration with Bryne McLaughlin in Toronto bars, with Clive Robertson or Graeme McCann for Kingston's annual "Tone Deaf" Sound Festival (which Leonard founded in 2002), and in 2002 with Jan Dufek on Radio Jeleni in Prague, Czech Republic. Most recently, a six-turntable installation *Arte del Contrapunto* was presented in Toronto in 2004.

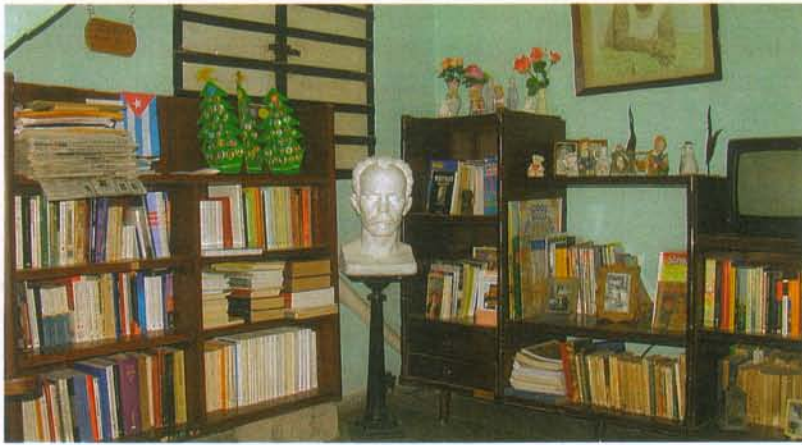
Other works have been sculptural or performance-related. In 2002, he installed a For Sale sign in front of the Swamp Ward Gallery in Kingston, but "sale" was not at issue. On closer examination, this sign listed all idioms beginning with the word "for": an ironic, open-ended partial poem, and an invitation for passersby to engage. In 2004 he created a *kind jester*, a performance project in which abandoned bikes were rebuilt and left in their repaired form as both a gift for their owners and as temporary public sculpture. Real-time video documentation of the fixing of the bikes was used to record the performances.

Chance discoveries have generated many of his projects. Having found an inscription by "Petr Krizenecky" in a book from a Berlin flea market, Leonard attempted to locate the man in the Czech Republic and return the book as a gift. Unsuccessful, he used it as the centre-piece of an installation (2002) for Zed Studio in Prague, the book open

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Biblioteca Elena Mederos (exterior),
Havana, 2005
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(exterior), Havana, 2005
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Biblioteca Dulce Maria Loynaz II
(interior), Havana, 2005

All photographs by Craig Leonard;
part of mixed media installation
Castro's Library, 2005





*Biblioteca Heberto Padilla (interior),
Havana, 2005*

for reading beside a fabricated text by Bozenka Bastlová, "On the History of Collectors and Collections in Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary" (1963). As a work, *Petr Krizenecky* was part installation, part performance, but based finally on process itself and an attempt to connect through social engagement. In a related piece that year, he arranged an event simply called *reunion*, where his former English-language students, as well as the general public, were invited to Galerie Display in Prague. Intended as an event that problematized "audience" and "performer", his ex-students were central to the event, as were the members of the general public in attendance; there was categorical instability for both ex-students and outside attendees.

Craig Leonard's artistic roots are in classic conceptual art, but also relate to both philosophy (Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*) and narrative (the pseudo-documentary of W.G. Sebald, Umberto Eco, or Woody Allen's *Zelig*), and to artists implicated in similar concerns including Ilya Kabakov, Sophie Calle, and Christian Boltanski. He is interested in both history and the obscure or marginal, and where these might intersect.

For *Castro's Library* in the present exhibition, chance was fully operative at the outset. In the course of research on such private libraries as that of James Joyce in Trieste and Jonathan Swift in Dublin, he wondered what more provocative libraries might exist and on a whim looked up Fidel Castro. Answers then generated new questions, and his query about Castro led to his discovery of an organisation called Friends of Cuban Libraries, with its invitation to "adopt a Cuban library" by sending books and supplies to any one of the hundred or so "independent libraries" listed on its website. Further research on the Friends organisation revealed that its objectives were contested by activists within several official international library associations. Leonard recognized the overlapping interests in libraries as sites of potential knowledge and the suggestion of intrigue behind the independent library movement in Cuba, which prompted further investigation that led him to New York and New Jersey to meet with two outspoken American librarians with opposing viewpoints on the matter. Their edited video interviews form the trigger event in the present installation.

Travelling to Cuba in December 2004, Leonard was able to visit several of the independent libraries and meet with the librarians themselves, and photograph both their exterior and interior spaces. Five of these paired images are included in *Castro's Library*. In some cases these "libraries" amount to a shelf or two of tattered books in someone's apartment, and their owners willingly talked about their gifts from the US Special Interest Section in Havana: books or little radios with which they can tune in to Radio Martí, a propagandistic station directly funded by the US government.

The "independent" nature of the collections, as well as their users, are rather loosely defined, apart from the fact that they are not supported by the Cuban state itself. Leonard has done a forensic analysis through itemized line drawings of two of the libraries he visited, identifying titles on their shelves. Newspapers are piled up, the accumulated result of his research: reprinted articles and commentaries mapping out the whole issue, presented as a sixteen-page tabloid *Biblio Files*, for visitors to take away.

Like many of Craig Leonard's earlier projects, words and language are the foundation of *Castro's Library*, but versions of the "truth", international politics and state influence, are also foregrounded here. No matter how many words are offered for our consumption, the answers lie in our own judgement and our willingness to view and assess. Understanding and real communication are revealed as limited, but in their elusive presence we hover at the edge of the art.