

Ron Martin

Ron Martin lives and works in Toronto. He is an established visual artist, arts editor, and freelance journalist.



John Scott's Construct, In Extremis

John Scott's *Construct, In Extremis* (Fig. No. 4) appeared in *C Magazine* (No. 1, Winter 83/84). It is a two-part, text- and photo-image-based work. The first part, *Construct*, consists of the juxtaposition of a poem and an enlargement, nine inch by nine and a quarter inches, of a colour photo, reproduced in black and white, of John Scott cross-dressed. The format of the second part, *In Extremis*, is identical except that the text is written as descriptive prose. The photo image, again reproduced in black and white, nine inches by nine and a quarter inches, depicts the artist afflicted with Bell's palsy. The two photos are reproduced from colour Polaroids, four inches by three and three eighths inches, belonging to the artist. The black-and-white reproductions reveal a web of fine lines, cracks or scratches running over the surfaces of the original Polaroids. The enlarged reproductions of those striations have the effect of distancing observers, making them feel conscious of their position as observers. As a result they are made more aware of the depth of illusion and of their separateness from the depicted subject. The emotional impact of this work implies that both the observers and the subject are confronted with having to overcome the immense distance between them. The idea that an emotional barrier underlies the relationship between the sub-

ject depicted and the subject being observed may be one of the problems Scott has worked through, by establishing the parameters and conditions of experience that we must wrestle with. We are obliged to wrestle with those parameters and conditions of experience on two fronts — text and image — that cannot be reduced to a tidy set of coherent facts. The significance of John Scott's *Construct, In Extremis* does not lie in
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 factual autobiography. The poem, the descriptive prose, and the photo images do not function as a unified, coherent whole. The formal concept underlying Scott's *Construct, In Extremis* does not reside in the artist's appearance but in how viewers recognize the signals, signs, and codes communicated through what they are looking at. In *Construct* we see John Scott apparently participating in the social exchange of cross-dressing, a means of communicating with other individuals by means of a code. In other words, the code is an analogy of the way viewers identify with what has subjective meaning for them. The poem associated with the image of John Scott cross-dressing encodes the primal language of feminine receptivity, a condition an artist partakes of in being open to feeling and to the experience of *what* he is; it has nothing

to do with *who* he is. Consistent with the structure of unconscious experience, Scott has realized how natural it is for viewers to create subjective meaning through a poem such as that included in *Construct*. The face we see in the photo image of *In Extremis* is distorted: from a comparison to the photo image of *Construct* viewers infer that a change has taken place in the artist's disposition and in his facial musculature. Bell's palsy would have made it difficult for a time for Scott to verbalize his ideas. In all likelihood, he would have been limited to a 'prosaic' existence, as indicated in the form of the text of *In Extremis*. Once his ability and power to communicate had returned, his attractive power of receptivity, realized in *Construct*, would also re-surface; at that time his identity as a creator of subjective meaning could be reintroduced. In *In Extremis*, Scott provides viewers with an analogy of creative motivation that transcends conventional artistic methods. His reflection upon the altered and threatening image of a subjective reality is an invitation to consolidate the
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 power to communicate. The worse thing that can happen to the artist is to be prevented from exercising his creative powers: this might precipitate a deep depression, which would, in itself, further test the art-

ist's ability to regain his creative powers. Thus, in *Construct*, Scott contemplates the image of the power of creation; in *In Extremis* we find the artist engulfed in the image of the loss of that creative power. Together, they provide a cogent picture of what it is to be an artist.
 Walter Klepac wrote in *Two Essays On Art and Knowledge* that creating through a self-conscious identification with one's role as an artist depends on "the emotional, professional, intellectual and personal which one makes in other people. In the end, the artistic ambition and the drive to achieve one's vision as an artist must depend on the understanding, belief and commitments of others in order to endure and become part of the culture. It is the identification of those needs and what is required to *fulfill* them and make them real that shapes the content of the text to fit both the title and the theme of the piece as a whole..."
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Workin' in the House

Harper's in the back yard
 Sellin' a reactor
 Carney's in the bank vault
 Throwin' out the Charter
 Flaherty's in the kitchen
 Cookin' up the Books
 They tell us they're the Government
 Why do they look like crooks?

Mackenzie King is gone
 He promised us a lot
 Interest-free money
 That's not what we got
 Half to the private banks
 Now we're in the red
 That's what happens Mac

When you listen to the dead!

The banks committed merger
 Martin said he had no clue
 Loose lips sink ships
 I bet that's one he knew!

To balance the budget
 Martin said he had the knack
 He owned up to our assets
 And we were in the black
 But if they need a bigger knife
 To give health care a whack
 They'll open up the deficit
 And move those assets back!

— Sydney White
 Committee on Monetary and
 Economic Reform