

cinema scope

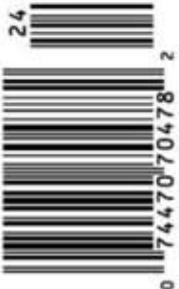
EXPANDING THE FRAME ON INTERNATIONAL CINEMA

OPEN 24 HOURS



DISPLAY UNTIL
APRIL 30, 2022

PAUL THOMAS ANDERSON
MICHELANGELO FRAMMARTINO
JOANNA HOGG JANE CAMPION
VADIM KOSTROV LUCY RAVEN



PM #0040046647



The Gift of Charity

Faraz Anoushapour, Parastoo Anoushapour, and
Ryan Ferko's *Charity and Surface Rites*

In the summer of 2017, the residents of Charity Crescent in Cathedraltown—an unincorporated town in the city of Markham, Ontario, just north of Toronto—were surprised by the arrival of a new monument to rival the Cathedral of the Transfiguration, which had given the town its name and served as its geographical and cultural focal point since its construction in the early 2000s. Sculpted by the artist Ron Baird, *Charity, Perpetuation of Perfection* was a 25-foot-high statue of the famed show cow Brookview Tony Charity, commissioned by the developer of the subdivision, Helen Roman-Barber. The real Charity had been partially owned by the developer's father, the Slovakian-born mining executive and entrepreneur Stephen Boleslav Roman, whose Romandale Farms had previously occupied the land on which Cathedraltown was built, and who had financed the construction of the cathedral in the '80s as an anti-Soviet gesture of solidarity with his countrymen still living behind the Iron Curtain.

The bewilderment of local homeowners at the erection of this curious "gift" in the local parkette quickly gave way to outrage at this public-art eyesore, resulting in a struggle between the community, Markham's municipal bureaucracy, and Roman-Barber, who—notwithstanding the fact that she had donated the statue to the city—claimed that she remained the artwork's owner, and was fiercely insistent that it remain in its original location. The resulting conflict made for a mini-media circus throughout 2017 and 2018, as punny headlines abounded in Toronto-area papers and the controversial statue became an Instagrammable destination. What seemed to be an intractable impasse was finally resolved thanks to a particularly violent windstorm, which compelled the city council to declare the sculpture a safety hazard after a chrome leaf broke loose from the wreath that sat around the cow's neck. In April 2018, the controversial statue was removed from the parkette and returned to Roman-Barber.



What seemed at best a moderately amusing sideshow becomes the locus of a far more penetrating investigation in *Charity* and *Surface Rites*, a new pair of linked works by Toronto-based artists Faraz Anoushapour, Parastoo Anoushapour, and Ryan Ferko. Presented as part of the group show *Greater Toronto Art '21* at Toronto's Museum of Contemporary Art, these twinned pieces examine how this battle over the identity of a manufactured community taps into the conjoined processes of extraction (of resources) and implantation (of culture) that underlies the entire colonial project on which Canada itself was founded.

Since meeting at the Ontario College of Art and Design in 2013, Faraz, Parastoo, and Ryan have made over a dozen projects together, from films and installations to live performances and written texts. Though none of the trio had any formal filmmaking training at the time of their first collaborations—Faraz had studied architecture, Parastoo set design for the theatre, and Ryan history—their interdisciplinary foundation has served them well in their explorations of the strangeness and singularity of specific locations, the theme that unifies all of their works. Investigating sites as diverse as Berlin (*Bunte Kuh*, 2015), Windsor-Detroit (*Signal to Babble (The Hum)*, 2016), Taipei (*Heart of a Mountain*, 2018), small-town Iran (*Chookah*, 2018), and idiosyncratic corners of Canada, often returning to the same location for multiple projects, the filmmakers position themselves as surveyors and excavators rather than experts, field researchers who home in on the curious details of place that can often go overlooked.

However, far from being purely disinterested observers cataloguing locations in their “natural” state, the collective is keenly interested in how the operations of power actively shape these environments. In a 2018 interview with Mike Hoolboom, Parastoo explained that the trio's partnership hinges on an imperative “to challenge or trouble authorship,” while in a Q&A following a 2018 screening of their films in TIFF's Wavelengths program, Ryan offered that “the

centre of our practice is questioning the authority of how images are constructed.” That interrogation extends to their own methods in their film work: after shooting enormous amounts of footage, one member will begin to shape this mass of material through their own edits and then pass it off to the next, who will further work it over before handing it over yet again.

Even given the diverse nature of their practice, *Charity* represents a new avenue in the trio's work. Commissioned by MOCA and produced by the National Film Board's Digital Studio, which has made the work accessible around the world through the NFB website, this interactive documentary marks the artists' first departure from the physical context of cinemas or exhibition spaces, even as it continues their use of archival and publicly accessible materials to reveal Canada's hidden-in-plain-sight histories of displacement, disenfranchisement, and cultural erasure. In this, *Charity's* most pertinent predecessor in their body of work would be the still-evolving installation *Radiant Temperatures of Openings*, first exhibited in 2015 and recently displayed at the Hamilton Artists Inc gallery in Hamilton, Ontario. Comprised of material gleaned from community archives, government reports, and oral testimony, the project deals with the construction of a hydroelectric dam along the St. Lawrence River near the eastern Ontario town of Cornwall in the '50s, and the disparate treatment accorded the affected members of the local white population (who were given ample notice of the project and provided with suitable rehousing) and the Indigenous Mohawk community, which was left in the dark and ultimately displaced by yet another of the colonial overseers' large-scale extractive projects.

Charity's first chapter, “The Cow,” opens with audio culled from the recording of a Markham city council meeting dated July 2016. After some preliminary throat-clearing and paper-shuffling, a woman's voice begins to explain the origins and purpose of the *Charity* sculpture, as well as the reason why the parkette on Charity Crescent is the only possible location for it: apparently, the cow had



once grazed on the fields that preceded the housing development. (A 2017 report by the *Toronto Star's* Noor Javed revealed this claim to be erroneous: in actual fact, Charity spent most of her life at Hanover Hill farm in Port Perry, approximately 50 kilometres east of Cathedraltown, where she was buried after her death from cancer in 1988.) As the audio of her presentation plays, we see 3D-imaging footage of the cow sculpture taking shape twisting and turning at the direction of the artist to mirror an archival photograph of the actual Charity. The visuals then switch to footage of the Royal Winter Fair, the kind of venue where the cow's legend was forged, and then to black-and-white images of work in progress on Cathedraltown, the onion domes of its namesake rising above the busy activity on the ground as the subdivision gradually takes shape.

The piece then cuts to Charity Crescent on an early spring day, as we are invited to test our 360-degree viewing capabilities to take in the green grass, clear blue sky, and bare trees of the currently cowless Charity Park. A real estate agent (played by an actor), who will function as our guide for the rest of the journey, appears, and we enter an unoccupied house that she is preparing to list. At this point, a clickable floorplan icon allows us to move around the house independently, as if we were exploring a virtual real-estate listing. *Charity* thus affords us two alternative viewing experiences: you can simply listen to the audio of the piece and wander the house on your own, or watch the film straight through, only using the interactive tools when prompted.

As the work progresses, the conflict over Roman-Barber's "gift" begins to enter our visual-spatial experience: newspaper clippings and design plans for the installation lie strewn across tabletops and counters, which we can zoom in on to examine; in the background, TV and computer screens display images of the sculpture prior to its 2018 removal. The saga continues to unfold as *Charity* moves through its subsequent chapters—"The Public," "The Residents," "The Cathedral," "The Storm," "The Leaf," "The House"—each of

which is soundtracked by either actual audio from the city council meetings, transcripts of the proceedings read out by our intrepid real estate agent, or news reports that play out on the house's televisions. Restricting its audio to the public record, *Charity* is only slightly less limited in its visual elements: the majority of the film is spent within the house on Charity Crescent, with only occasional ventures outside. The most extensive excursion is in "The Cathedral," in which the camera hovers above the parkette at likely the same height as the now-absent cow; as you gaze around, the spires of the Cathedral of the Transfiguration become visible over the uniform rooftops. In the same chapter, we accompany the real estate agent on a drive through the community past the cathedral, while we hear discussions about potential relocation sites for the statue.

As the work gradually unfurls, I found my preconceptions about the project running up against its actual shape. I had expected that *Charity* would invite the residents who had opposed the cow sculpture to partake in the making of the work and guide us through the story beyond the headlines; however, as noted above, the community's voice is confined strictly to the city council proceedings and news reports. By eschewing independent viewpoints, the filmmakers not only call into question the "illusion of completeness" (as Parastoo describes it) that can often be found in nonfiction filmmaking, but also signal the inherent limitations on the agency of the public—and, too, on our own agency within this so-called "immersive" experience.

Just as the soundtrack of the city council debate circles endlessly back through the same points in a purgatorial repetition—the residents hate the sculpture, think it's both an eyesore and a safety hazard, and want it taken down; the developer insists that the statue remains where it is, and threatens to sue the city if it is removed without her consent; the council, which is to a great degree beholden to the developer's whims, is embarrassed and struggles to find a compromise—so too does our seeming freedom to roam through the

spaces of the piece begins to give way to a sense of ineffectualness. While you can toggle around the house, zoom in on documents, spin in circles and peer through windows, you have no real ability to *discover* anything; in essence, you have become nothing more than a passive spectator to a foregone conclusion.

By the second-to-last chapter, “The Leaf,” the interactive controls are even removed from the film entirely, the veneer of control we had initially been granted replaced by a recorded image of someone else moving through the space with their own, entirely autonomous purposes. The fact that the texture of the piece so precisely mirrors that of a virtual real-estate tour further emphasizes our lack of control and participation. This is an entirely generic space, a vessel that we can temporarily inhabit but whose direction we cannot alter. That fact is driven home in the final chapter, “The House,” which calls back to the stereoscopic view of the cow statue at the beginning of the film with a 3D rendering of the dwelling we have been wandering through, an uncanny facsimile floating silently in a black void.

This emptiness is an apt analogue for Cathedraltown, which, even before the arrival of the notorious cow, had already been something of a misadventure. The subdivision had been planned as an attempt to manufacture Old World ambiance within the otherwise anonymous sprawl of suburban Toronto tract housing. Emulating the cathedral towns of Europe, the hamlet was meant to incorporate an artificial lake and a piazza, with the Byzantine architecture of the Cathedral of the Transfiguration serving as the spiritual-cultural focal point. However, not only did the developer skimp on the promised amenities, with the lake “nothing more than an overgrown storm-water pond” and the piazza seemingly perpetually unfinished (as the *Star*’s Javed reported in a 2015 article that preceded the statue imbroglio), but she also rendered the cathedral itself an empty vessel when, as a result of a dispute between her charity association and the Slovak Catholic Church over the title to the land, “the bishop at the time banned priests from saying Mass in the cathedral”—a prohibition that lasted a full decade.

The highly conditional kind of “benevolence” bound up in the Barber family’s bestowals of both the cathedral and the cow highlights how the formation of imagined communities such as Cathedraltown are inevitably bound up with the exercise of power. In *Charity*’s companion piece, *Surface Rites*, Ferko and the Anoushapours continue to explore the long history of domination and exploitation underlying the creation of this early-2000s suburban development, following the tentacles of influence that Roman-Barber’s father Stephen Roman spread across the Ontario landscape for the better part of half a century—not only as the motivating force behind the building of the Cathedral of the Transfiguration and founder of Romandale Farms, but also as a mining engineer and executive who was key in the huge expansion of uranium mining operations near the northern Ontario town of Elliot Lake in the ’50s. That boom-town growth was short-lived, however: once the US declared that it would no longer purchase uranium from Canada, the town’s population dwindled from 25,000 to 7,000 in under five years, while the watchdog website The Nuclear Chain notes that “as a lasting legacy of the ‘golden age’ of uranium mining, the radioactive tailings of Elliot Lake pose a threat to the environment of the Great Lakes region and the health of its inhabitants.”

On display at MOCA until early January, *Surface Rites* is a claustrophobic 24-minute piece that shuttles between static images and uncomfortably close close-ups, its frenetic movement and pinballing editing harking back to the collective’s previous work much more obviously than *Charity* does. The title is a play on the legal term “surface rights,” which Ontario’s Ministry of Northern Development, Mines, Natural Resources and Forestry defines as land ownership that does not include the rights to the minerals beneath that land—a distinction that has often been used to extract resources from Indigenous lands without compensating the communities that occupy them. In the context of the film, this twist on the term further articulates the artists’ view that the operations of power most often take place underneath the visible surface of the everyday.

Accordingly, *Surface Rites* is an agglomeration of moments and snippets: Catholic congregants at worship, footage from a low-budget zombie film, still photographs of the cathedral under construction, people handling rocks and gems, show cows being primed for display. In one notable sequence, the filmmakers tackle head-on the fantasies by which power seeks to sell its exploitation of the land to those whose labour they require to effect it when they sit down with Wesli Day and Joseph Owl, two young Indigenous men from Serpent River First Nation who grew up near the Elliott Lake mines. We see their hands in close-up as they point at and discuss aerial drawings and a marketing image from the boom times, the latter depicting how locals will be able to live, camp, and fish alongside the bustling uranium mine, each bucolic image framed by the whirling lines of an atom. “There’s a view of how everything should be!” one of the speakers declares, a comment whose irony is shot through with anger: both men know all too well the reality of tailings ponds and irreparably poisoned landscapes.

Although the Roman family is only alluded to in *Surface Rites* but never named explicitly, the thread that links that marketing image’s mid-century march-of-progress fantasy to Cathedraltown’s early-2000s promise of a throwback, European-style community makes their presence and influence felt. Although markedly different, *Charity* and *Surface Rites* work together to peel back the comforting Western illusion of constant innovation and the suburban pastoral and unveil the extraction mentality from which it derives. “I’m a builder,” Stephen Roman once declared, “whether it’s mines, churches, or houses...I was a dreamer who wanted to transfer those dreams into reality”; “It’s stealing,” counters the Tuscarora writer Alicia Elliott, extrapolating upon a definition of the extraction mentality by the Mississauga Nishnaabeg writer, musician, academic, and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson. “It’s taking something, whether it’s a process, an object, a gift, or a person, out of the relationships that give it meaning, and placing it in a non-relational context for the purposes of accumulation.” In their questioning of the dynamics of public and private space, the notion (and artifice) of “community,” and the ideological implications of the built landscape, Ferko and the Anoushapours offer cryptic yet telling interrogations of this theft, and the larger framework of colonial capitalism upon which modern Canada is founded.

You can view Charity at charity.nfb.ca