

## Che on the body

Barbara Astman probes capital's appropriation of Che Guevara's image

By DAVID JAGER

→ **BARBARA ASTMAN** at Corkin Gallery (7 Tank House), to August 17. 416-979-1980.

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**In Barbara Astman's photographs, Che Guevara becomes less revolutionary hero than ambivalent observer.**

Why does the image of Che Guevara persist? Toronto-based conceptual photographer Barbara Astman asks this question through her spare and elegant show at the Corkin Gallery.

She's used both performance and the body extensively in her art. The two are combined here in a deceptively simple process: Astman, wearing a Che Guevara T-shirt, took a series of Polaroids of herself dancing.

They resemble stills from an implied film strip in which Che's face, photographed in a wary, sideways glance, is distorted by the movement of her dancing body.

Astman appears to be underscoring a huge cognitive dissonance. The image of Che, monetized to the extreme over the last four decades on everything from mugs to wallets and key chains (his heroic forward-looking portrait has been called the most famous photograph in the world), is less the face of Marxism than that of late capitalism.

It seems, in fact, that Guevara's image is popular as the sexy signifier of an intense life, a life lived fully and dangerously according to autonomous principles. Che could sell luxury cars, in other words, his original message be damned.

Call it the sublation of Che: his face symbolizes revolutionary action remade as spectacle. Astman pointedly replaces the heroic Che with a more ambivalent one. "What's going on?" he seems to be asking.

On a formal level, the aesthetics of Astman's vintage images (Polaroids are fast becoming the new tintype) recall the heady Fluxus era of the late 60s, when conceptualism and radical performance were in full swing. Astman's dancing could be read as a celebration of – or a mournful tribute to – a bygone age when images weren't instantly appropriated by capital.

*Astman's related installation, *Dancing With Che: Enter Through The Gift Shop*, runs at MOCCA to August 11.*

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