

Romancing the stereotype

National Park a natural spot to subvert queer stereotypes

by Gordon Brent Ingram

Two summers ago in Banff a troupe of children came across a table by a wilderness lake. Two uniformed women, Winnipeg-based performance artists Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, sat with a banner that read "Lesbian National Parks and Service Wants You!" The "officers" gave literature and free pink lemonade. A number of the thirsty young campers immediately volunteered for the Junior Ranger programs and are probably still waiting to enlist in the coming years. Millan and Dempsey were two of the eight men who spent the July disrupting the public spaces of Canada's most famous nature wonder and tourist trap.

Playfully exploring how nature, Canadian nationalism and consumerism collide, *Private Investigators*, is the story of those performances. All eight artists used masquerade and disguise to "reclaim what has been lost, hidden or made invisible."

Tourism is supposed to make us feel good about ourselves. This group, organized by Kathryn Walter, wanted park visitors to look again. Through a series of performance that adapted traditional styles of clothing, aboriginal artists Billy Niro and Faye HeavyShield explored and subverted stereotypes of lesbians in the wilderness.

Kathy Kennedy held a "sonic parade."

Vancouver-based Judy Radul rented various male actors to explore the artistry of heterosexual privilege with people who had made contact with them. She interviewed later to find out the impressions left. One person who served them was so duped as to observe of the artificial couple that, "They looked like they

were just going through the motions. You see a lot of that here. People thinking this beautiful scenery will be some kind of romantic backdrop, that it will make them feel in love again."

Of all of the performances, it was the Lesbian National Parks & Services (fin-

ger@escape.ca) that endeared themselves to the tourists of Banff.

Dempsey and Millan became the impeccably uniformed authority figures that many visitors came so far to see. Here are some excerpts from their patrol notes.

"Patrolling Banff Avenue this morning, we encountered a young male, Homo sapiens. Displaying a certain strain of XY behaviour, the male shouted, "Fucking homos," before bounding away into a throng. (We were fascinated to observe that his survival instincts were clearly intact, despite the other developmental problems that he exhibited) . . . Leading a group of potential homosexual naturalists on a brief tour of the town this afternoon, we paused to examine various sites (the invisible Lesbian Heritage House and Gardens, etc) . . . Patrolling the campsite, Ranger Dempsey and I sight a pair of bewildered short-haired females. Clothed in colourful cotton, they carried the clear markings of the not-uncommon "Helper" lesbian. Because they displayed signs of confusion and fatigue we approached cautiously . . . Casual contact with Lesbian Rangers seemed to allay their fears, acting as a stopgap until they could migrate home."

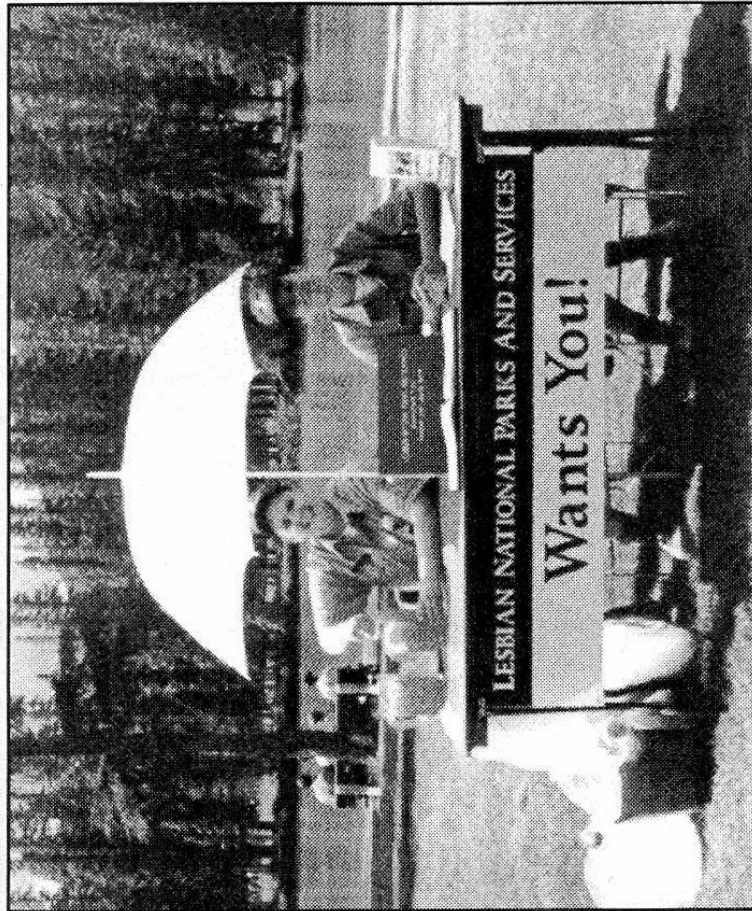
This little book documents how public space in our nation's most cherished tourist trap may never be the same. Now, perhaps it is time for the Lesbian National Parks & Services to come further west and start patrolling the streets of Tofino or, better yet, Vancouver.

PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS: UNDERCOVER IN PUBLIC SPACE

Essays by Kathryn Walter and Kyo Maclear

Banff Centre Press / 1999

press@banffcentre.ab.ca



MASQUERADE: Lesbian actors as uniformed authority figures.