

The written word's small, strange space

■ **ART** The Regional Assembly of Text has installations in drawers and even offers a club for letter-writing

BY CLINT BURNHAM

Tell a Vancouver artist that his or her art is "regional" and chances are they'll slug you. Regional suggests parochial, limited, provincial. It connotes, around here, hippy art, driftwood sculpture, seaweed weavings. But for the two women who run Regional Assembly of Text, there can be no higher praise.

Regional Assembly of Text is a storefront on Main Street (which may be the region implied: neighbourhood, or community) that offers, among other things, a monthly letter-writing club, an under-the-stairs gallery called "lowercase," a collection of books small enough to fit into your coin pocket, and probably the sweetest collection of typewriters this side of the Salvation Army.

Rebecca Dolen and Brandy Fedoruk are two Emily Carr grads who decided, after running book and zine shows from their apartment, and selling their silkscreen prints at craft shows around town, to consolidate their efforts and open a store. When you enter R.A.T. you feel as if you're going back in time. The store has been furnished from government surplus auctions and a school that was being torn down. So lockers are at the back, painted in the pleasing olive drab and grey of bygone times. Behind the counter is an impressive wall of steel drawers, some small enough to hold business cards. This is what databases used to look like, kids: drawers you pulled out and looked for something in.

Drawers, cubbyholes, and other fugitive spaces are what the R.A.T. is all about. Take its exhibition space, the lowercase gallery. Refer-

■ SUBTEXT

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ring to "small" letters, the term lowercase comes from the times when typesetters would work off large boxes of cold type letters, the capitals in the upper cases, and small ones in lower cases. Right now in the gallery is a show of work by Erin Boniferno titled *when i was small (of course)*. These are assemblages of Letraset and fabric on woodblocks.

When novelists in the Soviet bloc wrote works that they knew could not be published, this was called "writing for the drawer." At the R.A.T., they have installations in drawers: artworks like a buddha in a sea of packing foam. And in the front window is a Little Book Club — for \$50, once a month you will receive micro-pamphlets with titles like *172 Things 'To Do' In Order to Increase Your Level of Accomplishment*.

Less this is all seeming a bit twee — did I hear Belle and Sebastian on the stereo when I visited recently? — the Regional Assembly of Text has evidently tapped into something. Their first letter-writing club — complete with typewriters, paper, and stamps — attracted some 30 people. The place was packed, according to Dolen, suggesting that in this age of Instant Messaging and internet rage, there may be a niche for slowing down, doing small things, and taking more time with that letter. And guess what: Typists don't get carpal tunnel syndrome.