

NOTICED:TREND

Bike culture rolls into the mainstream



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I love driving a car. There, I've come out with it: the worst, most inflammatory statement anyone can make at this moment in history.

But seriously, I do enjoy driving, even if I lament what North American auto dependence has wrought, in wretchedly unwalkable cities and car-centric sprawl, as I also enjoy walking. What I find as both a driver and a pedestrian, however, is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to love my fellow cyclists, who are now so empowered by their environmental correctness that they have begun to proclaim their own (naturally superior and far more fashionable) bike "culture."

It is true that in Europe, biking is essential as a clean affordable way to get around clogged urban centres. In Copenhagen and Amsterdam, almost 40 per cent of residents ride daily. The new Vélib grab 'n' go program in Paris has been so well received that tourist attractions, now clogged with taxis and buses, will soon be clogged with bike racks.

Because of the crisis at the pumps, the number of North Americans who are opting to ride for utility is now on the rise here as well (according to the Bicycle Trade Association of Canada, bike sales were up 6 per cent in the first three months of 2008 alone).

But can a form of transportation, no matter how popular, become anything near a culture?

Well if we can talk about "digital culture" and "coffee culture," apparently so. In June, Toronto hosted the 2008 Bicycle Film Festival. Launched in New York in 2000 by Brendt Barbur and endorsed by art world heavyweights from filmmaker Jonas Mekas to artists Nam June Paik and Yoko Ono, the celebration of bike films, art and music now travels to nine North American cities.

It also makes an annual appearance in Tokyo, London, Vienna, Zurich, Paris, Sydney, Melbourne and Milan.

Curious as to what qualifies as "bike art," I popped in to the show, called Joy Ride, at the festival's Toronto opening. A scattering of pierced and tattooed 20-year-olds stood around drinking (domestic) beer and admiring, variously, a sculpture made of bike parts, needleworked bikes on linen and large-scale colour photography of street kids and their cool, customized rides.

After pondering a lovely series of collages made from bits of cardboard and found building materials, I asked the sweet, scruffy guy beside me what exactly they had to do with bikes and biking. "They're handmade," he explained in a gentle voice, emphasizing the word "hand." "Biking is all about human power, what we can do with our bodies, ourselves."

And so bike culture has its art bikes, like the tall bikes made from found parts by Manhattan gangs such

as Black Label and CHUNK666. Along with bike mags, there are online communities and blogs such as rockthebike.com, and urbanvelo.com that promote bike art and bicycle music festivals, where the emphasis is on people power and earth-friendly innovation.

Rides themselves have emerged as a sort of alternative community: L.A.'s MidnightRidazz ride together every second Friday of the month at midnight, as do Midnight Mass in Vancouver and Midnight Mystery in Victoria.

And then there's the World Naked Bike Ride (WNBC to its stripped-down proponents). Founded in 2005 in St. Petersburg, Fla., its motto, "Indecent exposure to cars," now inspires bare-as-you-dare rides in 70 cities across the globe.

This badass attitude is perhaps most clearly expressed by the global organization known as Critical Mass, whose raucous monthly protest ride meets in Toronto on the last Friday of every month to, literally, take over the streets, often in crazy hats blowing noisemakers. "We don't block traffic, we ARE traffic," reads their website.

Part of what fuels these movements appears to be exasperation with North American cities' large-scale failure to become bike - hence people - friendly. Witness the rise of those "Ghost" bikes - the white-painted makeshift memorials to bike fatalities that have begun popping up like apparitions on city streets from Sao Paulo to Tucson, a form of angry bike advocacy expressed through the medium of public sculpture.

That bike culture has finally reached its tipping point was made clear in February, when a series of orange painted bikes appeared on New York streets during Fashion Week (where, apparently, the hottest must-have accessory was none other than a foldable Dahon commuter bike). Turns out they were planted by DKNY, catching a ride on the trend.

The centre of bike culture is Portland, Ore. Dubbed Bike City, USA, for its cycle-friendliness, the Pacific hub is now, according to The New York Times, home to about 125 bike-related businesses, from companies that make bike racks to those that sell \$8,000 handmade bikes to a committed (and, apparently, deep-pocketed) breed of enthusiasts.

This group is growing fast in every demographic, particularly with the rise of biking as the sport of personal transformation. One dear friend, a busy banker in his late 40s, has spent every free moment of the past 10 years training and racing as a semi-professional competitive cyclist. To this year's gruelling schedule he added the Ventoux Sportive, a 173-kilometre race over Mont Ventoux in Provence known as one of the truly legendary climbs of the Tour de France. "It was the hardest thing I have ever done," he said, "but I think I came first in the 45-49 age, working, happily married, good father of three category."

One could dismiss this as just another fitness fad if not for increasingly popular efforts such as the recent Ride to Conquer Cancer. In June, almost 3,000 participants cycled from Toronto to Niagara Falls to raise money for Princess Margaret Hospital. Like that of many others of my acquaintance, my inbox was crowded all spring with donation requests from friends who had taken on training for the race as a personal goal. In their inaugural year, they raised an impressive \$14-million (my Ventoux-conquering friend's troupe alone came in second in the donor race, netting almost \$400,000 for research).

All of which, finally, has me dusting off my pretty pink Miele. In the end, it's not political correctness or even the price of gas that's got me - we're already down to one car, and if I see one more self-satisfied shopper with those cellulose totes (who probably rode in on a bike), I am going to scream. It's just that with bike culture riding such a wave, I might as well hop on.