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Suggested citation:

Carr-Harris, Ian (1992) Ransom notes in the mirror: Mark Gomes and the amazing fish. *C Magazine* (34). p. 24. ISSN 1193-8625 Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1099/>



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Ransom notes in the mirror: Mark Gomes and the amazing fish

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The following article originally appeared in *C Magazine* (<http://cmagazine.com/>). It is reproduced here with permission.

Suggested citation:

Carr-Harris, Ian. "Ransom Notes in the Mirror: Mark Gomes and the Amazing Fish." *C Magazine* 34 (1992): 24-30. Web.

THE USE OF IMAGE AND OF HUMOUR IS A WAY OF UNDERSTANDING OR BEING MORE COMFORTABLE WITH WHAT WE DON'T KNOW, WITH WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW.

MARK GOMES, APRIL 1992

I am making work that draws from and appropriates images of "homely speech." To these I apply the strategies of reconstruction and representation normally associated with the symbolic and the monumental. In this process, I ask questions of the "normal" cultural mediations that determine ownership and empower an object and text with authority. With this mixed breed, a kind of re-inventing having taken place, metaphoric possibilities allow for a different contextual perspective.

found but already putrid meanings it has accumulated over the centuries ("search for truth;" "defense of justice;" "passionate concern;" etc. etc.). A Dadaist is prepared to initiate joyful experiments even in those domains where change and experimentation seem to be out of the question (example: the basic functions of language).

A Dadaist is convinced that a worthwhile life will arise only when we start taking things lightly and when we remove from our speech

Paul Feyerabend²

Dilige, et quod vis fac.
Saint Augustine

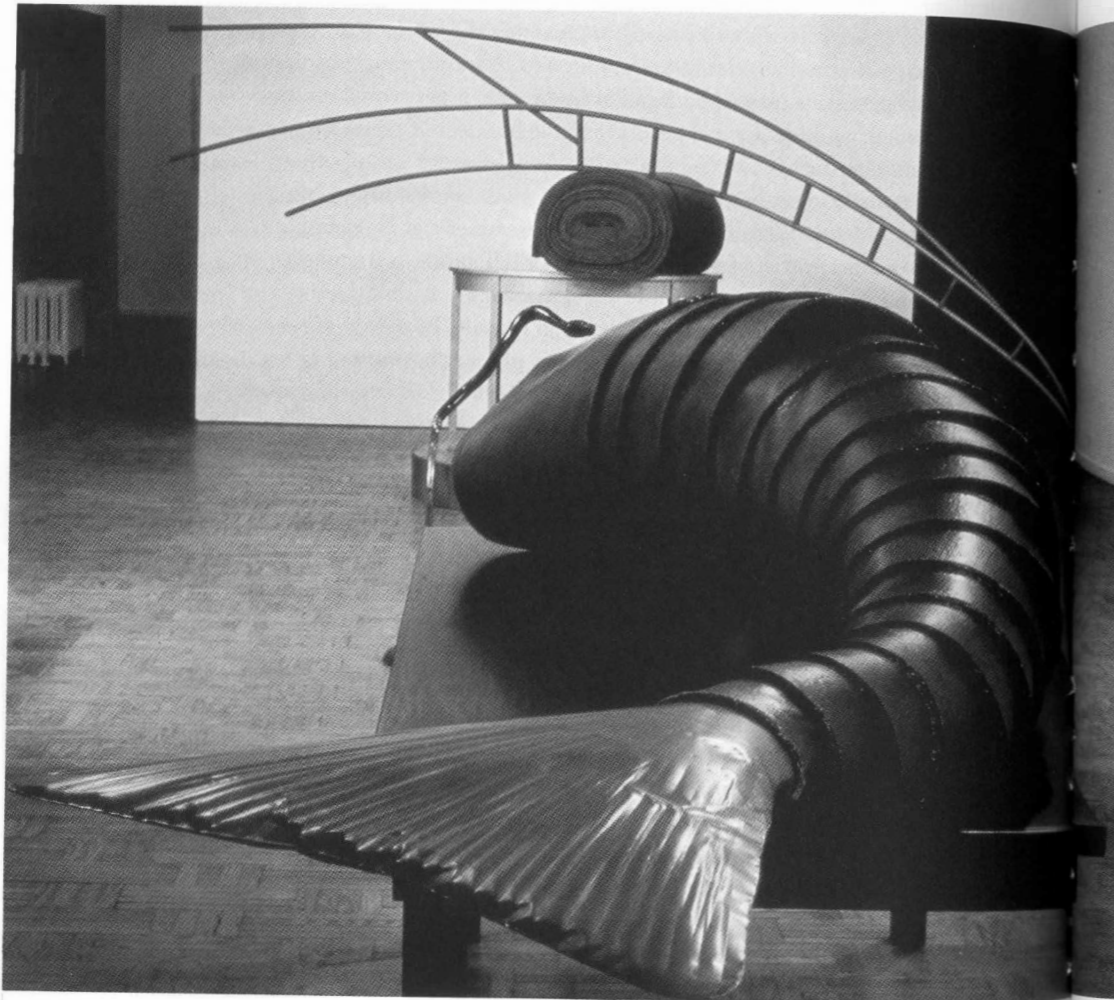


Photo: Michael Mitchell

RANSOM NOTES IN THE MIRROR:

MARK GOMES AND THE AMAZING FISH
BY IAN CARR-HARRIS

Saint Augustine's dictum could be rendered: "As long as you're serious, anything goes."³ The trick, as Feyerabend reminds us, is to know how to judge if you are serious. This is not an idle question. Whether cast as an anxious moment (if not a crisis) in the culture of critical modernity or as the triumph of modernity's mirrored nemesis, *postmodernity*, the question cannot be answered by an appeal either to categorical imperatives or to endless playfulness. The ethics of engagement have been destabilized and, like a Lenin without a

programme, we are left asking not "What is to be done?" but rather "How can I be serious?"

I want to consider here what a basis for "being serious" might be and in particular how a number of works by Mark Gomes over the last several years have posed that question.

Gomes tells us he is concerned with the "incoherence" of normal experience. His interest lies in returning us, as those who possess and are possessed by "homely speech," to an accommodation with the way this speech defines the

borderlines between knowledge and *unknowledge*, between authority and its lack. His determination is that the different perspective resulting from this accommodation will, in an important sense, resolve the dilemma of "knowing the unknowable." At the end, we may enter into a kind of serenity, as Ihor Holubizky has suggested⁴ – although perhaps a state of grace, in Graham Greene's sense of dialectical acceptance, would also be accurate. Within this state, we may then determine (as we will be determined

MARK GOMES . *Common of Piscary* (1984-85), Mixed media, 6x16x35 ft

by) "what is to be done." I am going to approach both the work and the statement somewhat obliquely through a story and an allegorical development of that story, employing certain contemporary theories concerning the nature of our experience in the world. By this I do not mean that the works addressed in this article can be subsumed under either theory or a story; on the contrary, they confirm our own disequilibrium through their ability to impose on us a rehearsal of how we are determined within our own engagements: it is their exemplary condition – their existence as models – that credits for us the theories of engagement with which they seem to be aligned. It is because I am talking of models – of tangibility – that I would like to start with Borges – and for this I am indebted to Julian Pefanis.⁵

Jorge Luis Borges: A Story

In those days the world of mirrors and the world of men were not, as they are now, cut off from each other. They were besides, quite different; neither beings nor colours nor shapes were the same. Both kingdoms, the specular and the human, lived in harmony; you could come and go through mirrors. One night the mirror people invaded the earth. Their power was great, but at the end of bloody warfare the magic arts of the Yellow Emperor prevailed. He repulsed the invaders, imprisoned them in their mirrors, and forced on them the task of repeating, as though in a kind of dream, all the actions of men. He stripped them of their power and their forms and reduced them to mere slavish reflections. Nonetheless, a day will come when the magic spell will be shaken off.

The first to awaken will be the fish. Deep in the mirror we will perceive a very faint line and the colour of this line will be like no other colour. Later on, other shapes will begin to stir. Little by little they will not imitate us. They will break through the barrier of glass or metal and this time they will not be defeated...

In Yunnan they do not speak of the Fish but of the Tiger of the Mirror. Others believe that in advance of the invasion we will hear from the depths of mirrors the clatter of weapons.

excerpts from *The Fauna of Mirrors*⁶

On Mirrors: An Allegorical Argument

There are two striking events in reading the Borges account of the relations between "the world of mirrors and the world of men." The first is to be informed calmly and without warning that, despite their history of easy passage from one world to the other, "One night the mirror people invaded the earth." Why? The other event is to realize, almost as an afterthought a few lines down,

that we, as readers, have assimilated this with equanimity as natural, as how things are done. The Emperor is within his rights, we might say, whatever we may feel about, indeed *despite* what we may feel about those rights. Why?

The question of the allegorical invasion seems contained in our reaction and may go something like this: the time before the invasion is that time of original harmony before identity becomes an issue of difference.⁷ The sudden inexplicable decision of the mirror people to invade "the world of men" marks the point at which identity in unity is already in collapse: the point at which the Yellow Emperor has perfected his magic arts sufficiently to ultimately frustrate and defeat the attempted invasion – an invasion surely undertaken, though too late, to prevent the deployment of those arts. The cause of the mirror peoples' anxiety about that magic is confirmed by the fate to which they are consigned: to become "mere slavish reflections." The true aggressor is the Yellow Emperor, not the mirror people and we, accepting automatically the triumph of the Emperor as right and proper, are guilty of complicity with irresistible power.

Again, why? When we comply, we yield to power. Compliance is therefore a form of defeat, however covert or considered or, indeed, indispensable. As such, it is the second agent in the defined opposition Victory/Defeat (or in Freud's famous example, the *fort/da* game),⁸ which exists by virtue of its recognition of indeterminacy or instability: if one of the agents in this opposition were always in defeat, always *absent* and the other always in authority, always *present*, there would be no opposition, indeed no significant relations of any kind; there would simply be two mutually exclusive realms – two arenas of mutual *unknowledge*. Authority, then, is inherently indeterminate: like compliance, it is a fleeting condition arising from an inevitable, perpetual and inherent combat inscribed into the fabric of relations. In the mirror, we can anticipate revenge. Let's look at mirrors.

There are three distinct stages in the development of our ability to know ourselves and to construct meaning.⁹ In the initial stage, we experience only amorphous fragmentation, a flux of unrelated sense impressions. This dream is suddenly and dramatically focused into relatedness, into coherence, when we see ourselves in the mirror – whether literally or through connecting

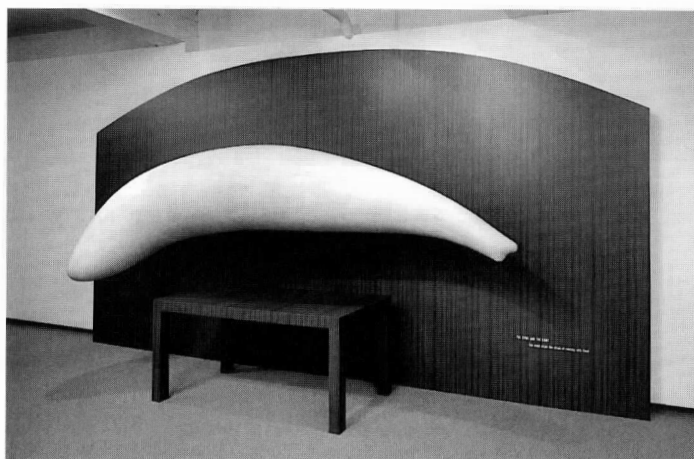


Photo: Peter MacCallum

forever shatter the conformity – the slavish reflection – imposed on us by the universal controlling law of the Symbolic Order.

Consequently, while in our conscious condition we reflect the Law, obey the dictates and “slavishly” support the Yellow Emperor, we wait behind the mirror for the destruction of that which we have become. We wait for our own death.

On Language

image of our own body with that of someone else's. What is achieved in this Mirror Phase is a powerful identification between ourselves and others: the self is imagined as identical to all other identities but most particularly the identity of the Mother. In the stage of the Imaginary, there is a bliss of unity: you and I say we experience each other; you could say we are able to look through the mirror.

The final stage, however, sees destruction of this harmony. The mediator this time is not the mirror but the social order in the form of the Father and we enter now into the Symbolic Order. We are confronted with and confounded by both social and sexual difference and our alienation, our instinctive attempt to eliminate this threat of difference causes us, like the mirror people in Lacan's category, to invade the Law, to attack the Yellow Emperor.

But we know the story now: the Symbolic Order constituted by the Law of Difference employs the magic art of language, using homely speech, to mark the forbidden line between the real and the imaginary. We become in consciousness “that which we are not,” according to Lacan.¹⁰ Held in the mirror and forced into mere reflection of the Law's image, we become split between what we are and what we are not and our desire to become again what we no longer are – the mirror people before defeat and inscription by the Law – is repressed and remains suspended in a state of unconsciousness, constant and unrealizable, waiting for the Emperor's magic arts to falter, waiting for the revenge that will

In the thrall of the Yellow Emperor, we are in the thrall of language and language, Lacan has suggested, is “what hollows out being into desire.” It is the agency through which we are forced to give up all claim to the imaginary realm of undifferentiated identity. We are split forever and from this point on we are bound to a chimera – the chimera of the Emperor's magic arts – as we lust for a forgotten bond in which identity is not bound but coincident.

What is the nature of this chimera? In a word, erasure.¹¹ Language reconstructs meaning as difference: terms (signifiers such as mother, father, good, bad, etc.) define each other through their difference from one another. But they must do so within a funhouse of alternative differences and any definition arising from their interrelationships must be transitory, always in the process of being overwritten by another. In the end, there is no fixed meaning just as there is no fixed end to meaning: there is only a “constant flickering of presence and absence together,”¹² as terms erase one another in a continual deferral of absolute meaning. No term is ever fully present in itself, never stable: in language we are always already absent. In the Emperor's thrall, we can only mimic.

“... a kind of re-inventing having taken place, metaphoric possibilities allow for a different contextual perspective.” It is surely one of the marks of language that its politeness betrays the hand of the Emperor. The perspective Mark Gomes would show us is not so polite: it is the dilemma of our enforced enslavement, of

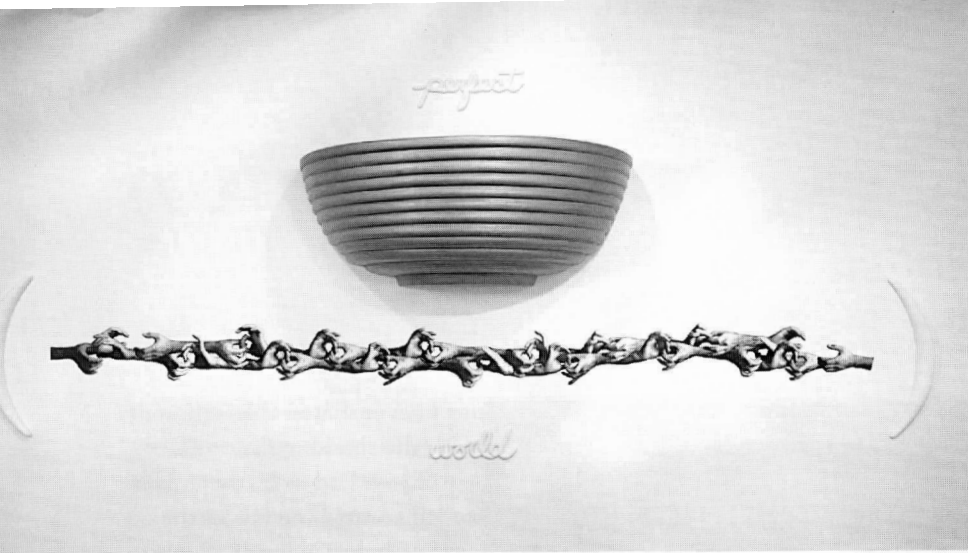


Photo: Peter MacCallum

“IN THOSE DAYS THE WORLD OF MIRRORS AND THE WORLD OF MEN WERE NOT, AS THEY ARE NOW, CUT OFF FROM EACH OTHER.”

our rage that *what we need to know* is trapped within the mirror. How can we act when we dare not speak: when speech itself is at the very heart of the apparatus that imprisons us, makes us mere reflections acting out a comic-book existence?

A Dadaist is prepared to initiate joyful experiments even in those domains where change and experimentation seem to be out of the question (example: the basic functions of language).

In Borges' story, “The first to awaken will be the fish.” I'll begin with a particular fish.

Common of Piscary (1984/85)

An elegant space is opened up for us, defined by a table standing on a dais constructed of the same parquet design as the floor of the gallery on which it sits, integral to it. On this table lies a heavy roll of carpet, its red pile rolled in, its black canvas underside exposed. Most remarkably, balanced on this roll, an expansive trajectory (like that of a falling star) constructed of steel tubing is described. Facing this unlikely interior, resting on a second table – this one black and somewhat squat – rests a huge headless “fish,” its body of the same rolled carpet as on the dais but in a curved and sinuous spiral tapering to a very fishy tail. Finally, between these two encounters, like a semi-colon, is placed a sensual squiggle of black carved wood, a sort of cross between a standing microphone and a snake: the figure of the “trickster?”

The moment is one of precognition: an interior that mocks its designated space, a falling star, a fish that is no fish, a squiggle of a line that marks a line like no other: “Later on, other shapes will begin to stir. Little by little they will not imitate us.



Photo: Michael Mitchell

ABOVE LEFT: MARK GOMES, *Perfect World* (1989–90)
Laminated colour laser prints, mixed media, 98x120x26 in

MARK GOMES, *Ransom Notes* (1992)
Cast Aluminum, 4x16x8 in

The Cynic and the Saint (1986/87)

Against a plain, arched panelling of red mahogany stands a rectangular red mahogany table, puritanical in its simplicity, chameleon-like in its assumption of the panelling's colour and grain. Suspended over the table, floating in front of the panelled wall, looms a bloated, white, balloon-like shape: part trophy, part portrait, part animal – part human in its atavism. To one side, on the right, we read on the wall an inscription, in effect a memorial: "The Cynic and the Saint – few could stand the strain of relaxing with them."

Like the Cynic and like the Saint, we wait for our own death; a death-watch in which our recognition of the absurd repetitions imposed on us by conformity with the Law is empowered by a sense of the shape that is like no other shape, by the stillness of a room that masks the mirror. "They will break through the barrier ... and this time they will not be defeated..."

Perfect World (1989/90)

A great container made of grey-black coils stands half in, half on the wall in front of us. Below, a coloured silhouette of hands linked in a chain of interlocking closure like a child's paper cut-out forms an image across the wall that is half sentence-like, half like the surface of a sea. Anchoring these, rendered in low-relief and forming with the bowl and the sea an equation of great symmetrical beauty, hang the two words: *perfect world*, split apart so that they are not so much a coherent phrase as single word-signs floating above and below in harmonic balance with the

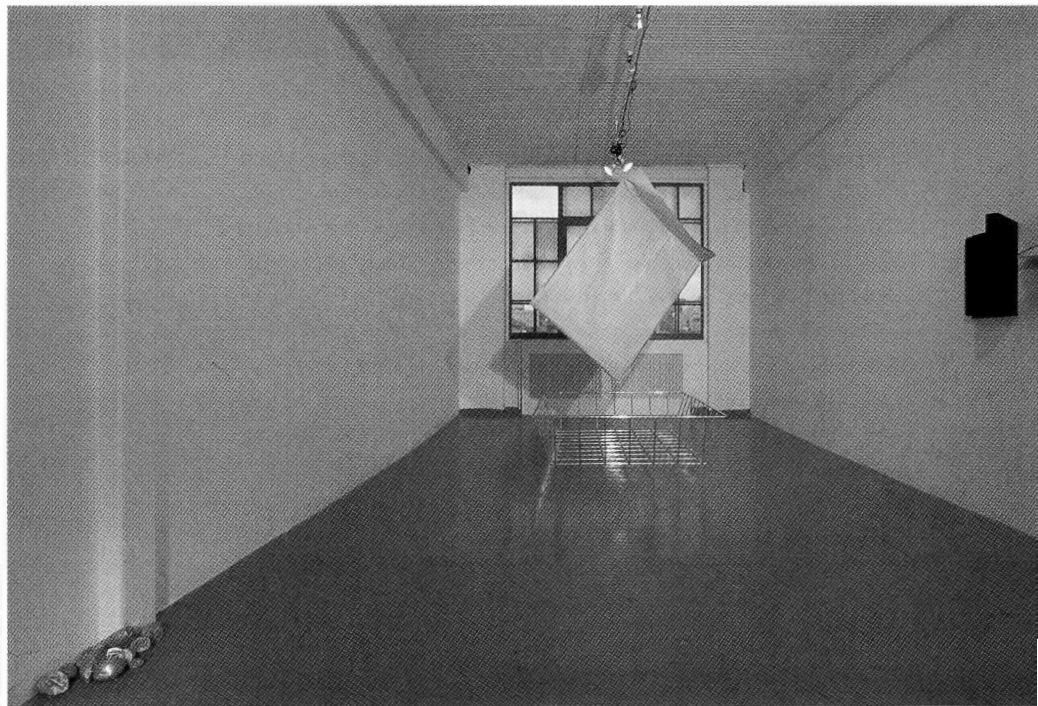


Photo: Michael Mitchell

images they now resemble. Enclosing this equation and also in relief, white brackets register a removal, a suspension of this state.

"Both kingdoms, the specular and the human, lived in harmony; you could come and go through mirrors." There is a familiarity about this equation, a connectedness that seems oddly mesmerizing; perhaps a glimpse from the corners of our eyes into that time before "the mirror people invaded the earth" and lost to the Yellow Emperor. A flashback into the realm of the Imaginary when the world could be depicted resting on the back of a giant turtle swimming in an infinite sea. A time in which there was no time, when all was centred, contained, linked together; a time now set aside, bracketed by language, by time itself, by difference.

In/Out (1992)

A large dun-brown envelope, the padded kind used for sending documents or books, hangs suspended over a wire basket, the kind

MARK GOMES, Installation view showing *In/Out* (1992) Paper & aluminum, 96x55x76 in

used for in/out trays on desks. But here, both basket and envelope are vastly out of scale. Monumental in size, the basket rests not on a desk but just slightly off the floor; equally huge, the envelope hovers above, neither in nor out, frozen in time. Eerily, we ourselves seem diminished, suddenly infantile, reinscribed into a time when the world was a foreign country, a place in which our fears and fantasies held no value, a time when we found ourselves locked in deadly embrace with forces that, little by little, imposed on us who they determined we should be – forced on us “the task of repeating, as though in a kind of dream, all the actions of men.”

“In those days the world of mirrors and the world of men were not, as they are now, cut off from each other.” As we stand transported in front of, but also deliciously within this ironic interplay of the world of adult business with the world of children, we play again that fort/da game played by Freud’s infant grandson: the envelope, neither in nor out of its basket, rehearses our terror of union betrayed and our joy at union regained; rehearses a history that took us from a time when “you could come and go through mirrors,” through the long night of the magic spell, the Valley of Death, to that anticipated moment “when the magic spell will be shaken off” and the Yellow Emperor “will hear from the depths of mirrors the clatter of weapons.” In our consciousness, Desire trembles in its insatiable determination.

Ransom Notes (1992)

In a corner of the room, ten or so cast-aluminum potatoes form a little pile against the wall; inconspicuous, almost unnoticeable. On closer inspection they are seen to be stamps, the sort that children make to stamp designs on paper. These, however, carry not designs but letters, the elements of language. We can read the letters but their message remains mysterious, undecidable.¹³

We try to make sense of them, but there is not enough: it is merely a fragment, premature or too late. It is impossible even to know from whom they come, to whom they are directed: we have forgotten so much, we have become what we have feared. “Others believe that in advance of the invasion we will hear from the depths of mirrors the clatter of weapons.” Perhaps, instead, we will only find – from time to time, lurking in the corners of mirrors, mysterious and impenetrable – childlike ransom notes: a promise of reunion made mockery in language.

... et quod vis fac?

I am aware that in attempting to clarify the disinterments that Mark Gomes reveals – the fraught complicity that describes our

forced engagement with the world – this too-brief article must paradoxically seem to fail in its stated goal of re-establishing a use of Saint Augustine’s permission to act. But the paradox, like all paradoxes, is only apparent: it is precisely in knowing that what we know is never precise and that what we can no longer be is also forever what we are that we can find a means of being serious that refuses to take itself seriously – as we examine at every step the implications and consequences of loss and re-establish in every moment the Grace by which to agree that “anything goes.” Perhaps there lies immense wisdom in indecipherable ransom notes made by children.

Ian Carr-Harris is a Toronto-based artist with an interest in the characterization of identity. He teaches full-time at the Ontario College of Art; his courses include sculpture, installation and cultural theory. Before graduating from OCA in sculpture in 1971, he studied Modern History at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ont. and Library Science at the University of Toronto. He has written on contemporary art for *Parachute* and *Vanguard* as well as C.

Notes

1. The shorter statement is from a telephone conversation with the artist; the longer was written for the Canada Council Art Bank.
2. Paul Feyerabend, “Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge,” quoted in John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics* (Indianapolis: Indianapolis U. Press, 1987), p.212
3. Caputo, p.212. Although Caputo uses *dilige* in the sense of “love” (as in love of learning or “diligence”), I believe “commitment” is as appropriate a term to employ; it is in this sense that I have translated *dilige* as “be serious.”
4. Ihor Holubizky, essay published in the pamphlet for the exhibition “Literati” in the Toronto Sculpture Garden (July 14-Sept. 30, 1988)
5. Jorge Luis Borges, “The Fauna of Mirrors,” quoted by Julian Pefanis in “Revenge of the Mirror People,” *Heterology and the Postmodern* (Durham: Duke U. Press, 1991), pp.103-19. I am indebted to this work for unlocking the perspective I bring to Mark Gomes in this article, however, I have used Pefanis’s material only in a partial sense.
6. *Ibid.*, pp.103-04
7. The ensuing paragraphs in one way or another restate Pefanis, pp.103-19
8. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (London: Blackwell, 1983), pp.185-87. The German *fort/da* can be translated “lost/found;” the reference is to Freud’s use of his infant grandson’s game of throwing a toy tied to a string out of his pram, crying “fort,” and pulling it back with a gleeful murmur “da.” With this incident, Freud illustrated his principle of psychic loss and recovery.
9. I am restating Eagleton, pp.164-70 but see also Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp.99-101, which I have also used in attempting to clarify these processes.
10. Moi, p.99
11. See Eagleton, pp.128-30. I have, of course, greatly simplified Eagleton’s restatement of Derrida’s ideas.
12. Eagleton, p.128
13. “Undecidable” in the sense that Derrida applies to language