

SUBJECT TO CHANGE

TEXT/CONTEXT
Writings by Canadian Artists

Valued as compelling primary sources that illuminate artistic practice, artists' writings strongly resist categorization and traditional narrative forms. Text/Context publishes collections of essays, statements, articles, lectures, and other written interventions by Canadian artists, collating published and unpublished texts that are otherwise scattered, hard to find, or not easily accessible to readers. In bringing together artists' written works, Text/Context explores the interrelations of what and how they write, as well as where they publish, to the rest of their practice. Books in the series illuminate an artist's relationships not just to her/his/their own work and practice, but to their peers and to broader social, economic, cultural, and political questions. The series was founded in 2019 and is edited by Geoffrey Robert Little.

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Subject to Change: Writings and Interviews, Liz Magor (2022)

More Voice-Over: Colin Campbell Writings, Colin Campbell & Jon Davies (2021)

Everything is Relevant: Writings on Art and Life, 1991–2018, Ken Lum (2020)

Subject to
Change

Writings and
Interviews

Liz Magor

Concordia University Press
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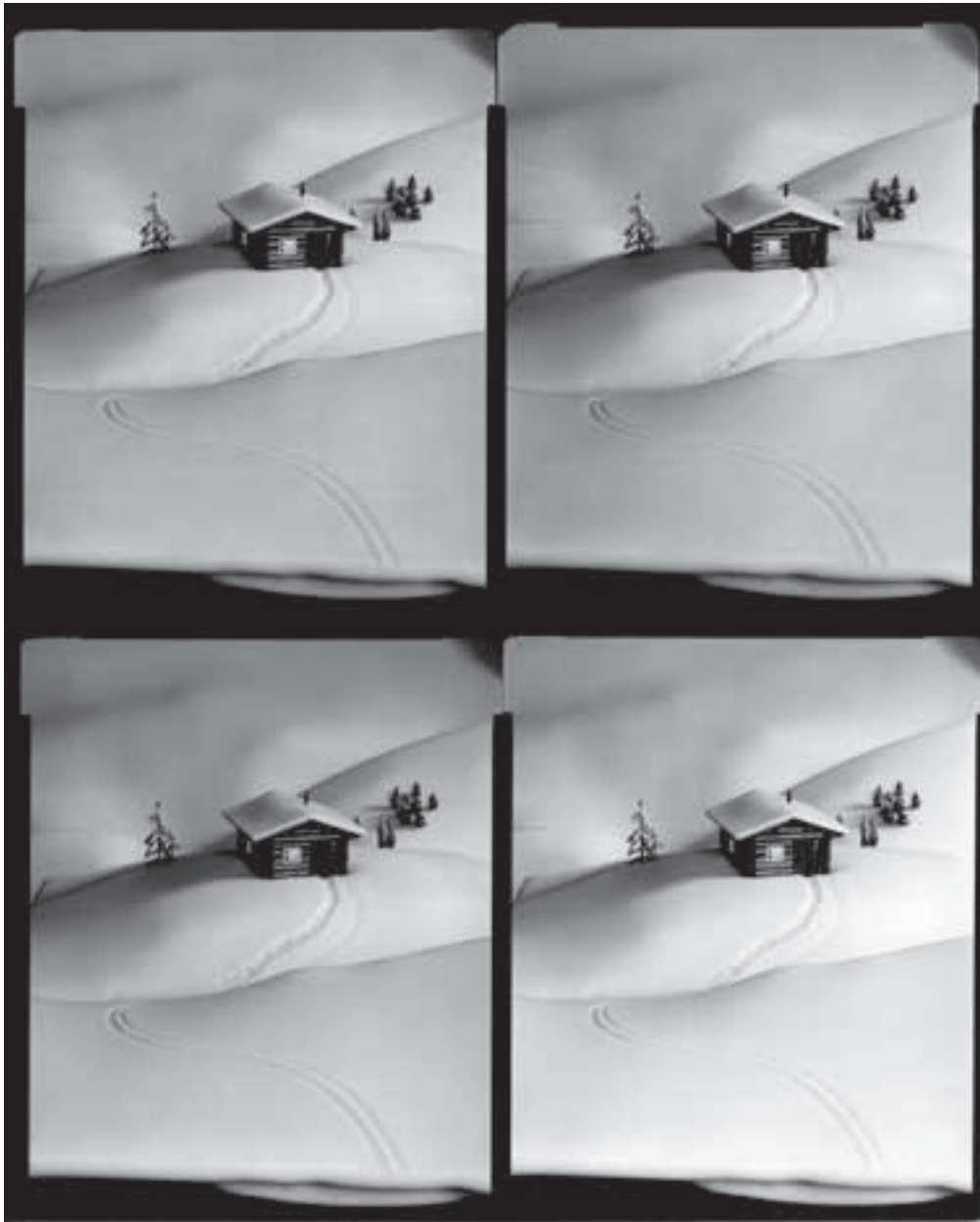
Connected to each piece in this collection there is a memory of its origin. In most cases it was an invitation extended by a curator to contribute to an exhibition catalogue or similar publication. In every case my immediate reaction was to avoid the situation knowing how demanding the work would be for me, a non-writer. While I vividly recall the agony of sitting at a desk for hours trying to pull out one sentence after another, followed by a vow to never do it again, I am ultimately grateful that I have this record that runs parallel to my years in the studio.

For this I would like to thank the curators I have worked with since 1971. Not just those who commissioned these essays, but all of them: those who spent hours with me developing extensive exhibitions, those whom I never met in person, those whose names I have forgotten, those who wrangled a herd of artists into a group show, and those who shared their personal lives with me. Curators have consistently provided strength, faith, and vision when the path was obscure. In fact, in his introduction to this book, Philip Monk proceeds in exemplary curatorial fashion by laying out the context within which these writings may be considered; an aid to understanding that amounts to an essential service. That he continues to apply his care and attention to my work is a great gift.

If editors are the curators of text, I must express my gratitude to Geoffrey Little for initiating this book and seeing it through with such exceptional dedication and thoroughness. His discoveries and suggestions for the book were always surprising and useful, as were his suggestions about poetry, book design, dogs, and thrift stores. It was a pleasure to work with him.

Finally, I extend my sincere thanks to the organizations and individuals that have supported the publication of this project in myriad ways.

Liz Magor
Vancouver
February 2022



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Unexpectedly, here is a collection. These notes and short essays, written over more than forty years, were produced in response to various prompts, with the majority being an attempt to get a grip on how my work was operating. Writing in service to understanding the studio work started tentatively in 1977 with a three-paragraph statement that begins, "I am interested in what people do for work." This blunt reveal is followed by a more detailed declaration of interest in what animals do for work, concluding with a poetic conflation of humans and creatures—their projects, tools, and products—that is truly weird to read now. The oddness of the submission was not helped by a critical typo that swapped the word "good" for "food," resulting in a possible, but not intended, meaning. In this statement, a disorganized mess of flawed writing, editing, and printing, I was introduced to the fundamental condition of visual art wherein the possible and the probable, the latent and the obvious, the mistaken and the intended all assert themselves in rapid alternation. This slipperiness of meaning can be unnerving, and as a young artist I used writing as a way to stop the confusion and nail things down. As an older artist I see the folly of such control and I use writing as a way to accept it.

Confusion is more blatant in language constructs than material form as words are vetted and encouraged to cleave to intended meaning. For example, I notice the fallacy of referring to gypsum cast in the image of a vegetable as "a carrot" more urgently than I distinguish a plaster carrot from an actual carrot, which are both "real" but in different ways. Writing helps me pry apart these critical distinctions using the relative precision of language to trace lines of connection through a mess of signifiers and materials. Where the line gets snagged is a place to consider options and question my version of events. I often undertake the writing during or just after I've made a work, not with a plan to correct or make the art more understandable but to try to see what I really want, as opposed to what I think I want. If I use language for posing questions, the sculpture has a chance to continue its search for what I don't yet know. This inverted relationship, with the work taking the lead, is not an easy habit to develop. Sometimes I distrust the nonsense of material form, and always the writing is difficult without the crazy fun that can happen in the studio. But

gradually I've learned that the struggle between object and word makes the object smarter and gives it the strength to overwhelm language eventually. Words roll off the back of the real thing as it assumes authority over intention and meaning, however illogical.

I hope that my respect for the authority of the thing is the reason for my consistent resistance to footnotes. I wasn't aware of their complete absence in my writing until I had all these gathered together, and I have to admit I'm proud of my inadvertent ideology. In my time we went to "art school," as opposed to "art university," and we didn't write essays in art school. Novels don't have footnotes, nor do poems. I appreciate these forms far more than the typical theoretical treatise, so I've not learned the habit of citation. Instead, I bash away at the structure of each sentence, in the same way I rework a form in the studio, until it's able to carry everything I ask of it. I want a sculpture to be fully present in the room, independent of reference and back-story. If it refers to something that isn't apparent, it only invites the mind to go elsewhere, making the encounter of the body and object irrelevant. Not only is the phenomenology of the art object possible, but it's what I want and, in this spirit, I regard footnotes as analogous to plinths, an impediment to the pertinent encounter.

If writing provides a discipline for an ongoing practice of submitting to the real, then it's as useful for looking as for producing. Some of the essays here are about other artists' work, but mostly they are for my own benefit as an aid to understand what I think I'm doing. Of course, when they're published, they change position and operate more as a defence of what I'm doing, especially in the years following *Field Work*, a portfolio of photographs taken in the late 1960s of my "back to the land" friends. I thought I was being critical of the allusions to Indigenous culture assumed by the subjects in the photographs, but I was mistaken, and so was launched into an appropriation controversy in the early 1990s. For several years thereafter, my writing had the ulterior motive of trying to dig myself out of an uncomfortable position. This was a hard time and I was treading very carefully; every written statement felt loaded and explosive. I became tighter and more formal, both on the page and in the studio, and while some of my work of the 1990s is strained, in hindsight I was learning how to sort through layers of signification, mining for the emotions that animate our behaviours and exposing them in form.

I've put more effort into learning how visual art operates, so I expect, and hope, that the studio work is more eloquent than the writing. In addition, I've developed a bias for the image over the idea and so, to ensure that texts come across in a full way, I've always accompanied them with pictures, projected and printed. For example, *Auto Portrait* (1990) was published with six photographs of the collars and throats of the women cited. Each of them had something there: a flower, a broach, a scarf, as mute proof of what I'm asserting in the text. In these instances of teamwork, the writing avoids any reference to the pictures as though they are together but speaking different languages.

Much of one's life is spent determining which aspects of human belief are pertinent to us now. Our accumulated histories leave behind artifacts that make up the material world providing signs to ideologies and events that may be over, or under, valued. Here, deep in the visible world, artists find a route to feeling and knowing the lives we have, choosing which values to hold and which to reject as false or irrelevant. This is the place where art operates. Forty-five years ago I didn't know I would be able to spend so many years in this zone. But now, I use this book to record that this is what I have done for work.

Introduction:
Worrying
the World
of Things

Philip Monk

Artists' writing is a denomination that does not define a genre, or only very loosely. There is too much variety. So unless an artist is also a critic or writes expository or theoretical essays, there is no real context for her texts but her own work. This is the case for Liz Magor. Here we find traditional artist statements, catalogue essays on other artists, some of whom she curated, interviews and lectures on her own work, defences, too, installation instructions, communications with dealers and writers, as well as unpublished writing, all of which we might plumb for her working process rather than take as explanations of a finished product. This was her purpose in writing: not to state an intention or meaning. "If I use language for posing questions, the sculpture has a chance to continue its search for what I don't yet know."¹ Unknowing would be a condition of being even if it unravelled identity.

1

Liz Magor, "Author's Note," this volume, xi.

Let alone the things of the world, writing was worrying for Liz Magor, right from the start. Of her first artist statement, she said she "was introduced to the fundamental condition of visual art wherein the possible and the probable, the latent and the obvious, the mistaken and the intended all assert themselves in rapid alternation."² Isn't "this slipperiness of meaning" an effect of simulacra where original and copy, authentic and inauthentic, true and false exist in unstable mixture? Yet sculpture needs be stable. Magor's choice of sculpture as her artistic discipline was a desire for things to be securely in their place. At first, she used writing to "hold things down," to get to the truth of things, to confirm their identity, because her identity, too, was at stake. But eventually, with the passage of time, she realized the "folly" of trying to constrain meaning. Maybe, after all, the vitality of creativity lay in what was aberrant, seeking expression in the possible, the latent, and the mistaken, not in anything certain. Magor always welcomed slippage in this certainty as much as it simultaneously worried her. Writing was a probe of the world, of things, and of her practice. Writing accompanied her studio practice as another tool, but not to guide it or explain it after the fact.

2

Magor, "Author's Note," this volume, xi.

Being an artist in Canada has few rewards. Yet Liz Magor has had her share: participating in major international art events (the Sydney Biennale in 1982, documenta 8 in 1987, co-representing Canada at the Venice Biennale in 1984); a recipient of Canada's major visual art prizes (the Governor General's Award in the Visual and Media Arts in

2001, the Audain Prize in 2009, the Gershon Iskowitz Prize in 2014); collected by museums across Canada; and still, after five decades, having a robust international presence, rare but for the most select of Canadian artists. This is remarkable. But it was not always destined. Imagine growing up mid-century in Prince Rupert, a port city, really a town, on an island on the northwest coast of British Columbia, where fishing and forestry are the primary industries. This was hardly a conducive cultural environment for a would-be artist. Yet Magor migrated to Vancouver to study art, then to New York, and back again to Vancouver. Schooling was not a satisfactory experience. “I’d been to three different post-secondary institutions [between 1968 and 1971] and dropped out of all of them not knowing whether it was me or the school that was wrong.”³ Reading at one go Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* in 1970 proved to her that she was not the problem. Feminism was “a credible framework for understanding the incoherent and incapacitating facets of my life.”⁴ By her admission, she was late to feminism (at twenty-two, she could be excused), but a feminist artist she would be.

She was a sculptor in a man’s field, but wasn’t art and the art world, after all, a male thing, still then when she abandoned art school, finally, in 1971? She practiced as a sculptor, participating in group exhibitions from the early 1970s on, starting in British Columbia and moving eastward across the country. Her participation in the 1982 group exhibition *Mise en Scene* at the Vancouver Art Gallery reveals both her collegial context—showing with British Columbian sculptors and installation artists Kim Adams, Mowry Baden, Roland Brener, Al McWilliams, and Jerry Pethick—as well as the gender discrepancy, which was little different across the country: five men to one woman!

By then, Magor had already moved to Toronto (in 1980), at a time when Toronto was attracting artists from across the country as a burgeoning new art scene. She was immediately taken on by one of the city’s prominent new galleries, the Ydessa Gallery, and in 1986 she had a solo exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario, a rare occurrence for a woman at that time. Having been attracted to a scene that had installation artists such as Ian Carr-Harris, John Massey, and John McEwen, whose work she had seen in a 1980 group exhibition at the Vancouver Art Gallery, she was later included in the major

3

Liz Magor and Lesley Johnstone, “A Conversation with Liz Magor,” this volume, 309.

4

Liz Magor, “Home and Native Land,” this volume, 173.

Canadian exhibition of this new artistic phenomenon, *Aurora Borealis*, in Montreal in 1985. Yet, initially, Toronto was no stimulus to change her artistic practice developed on the West Coast.

Artist statements suffice to explain Magor's common interests between, for instance, *Four Boys and a Girl* made in Vancouver in 1979 and *The Most She Weighed / The Least She Weighed* made in Toronto in 1982. These first statements, such as "Production/Reproduction" (1980), set out a program for her work but admit what escapes it at the same time. Of works such as *Four Boys and a Girl*, which pressed out similar forms from its restraining apparatus, she claimed that she wanted "to objectify some history of a life or at least the life of a body and the process of change that affects that body." Her overarching need came from the fact that she was "always looking for comfort in a world disturbingly subject to change." She admits, "while I can only parallel the events of a natural history, there is modest consolation in effecting a real change in the material of the work; forcing it to form, to repeat, to reorder its appearance." Yet she found that she had "simultaneously manufactured my own competition as the pieces themselves take the opportunity to manifest *their* history, their own generation and transformation."⁵ Replicants had a life of their own that evolved, or, rather, devolved over time. They were creatures of time. On the contrary, in *The Most She Weighed / The Least She Weighed* Magor cast her subject Dorothy's story in stable lead, as unvarying a substance as the control Dorothy wished over her own identity: that she only recognized herself at a certain weight, not with the other "Dorothys of aberrant weights."⁶

5

Liz Magor, "Production/Reproduction," this volume, 6.

6

Liz Magor, "Like a Tune," this volume, 10.

Identity and its variants, such were the subjects of Magor's art—their form, too. Her contrary emotions of comfort and worry sought singular form in sculpture, but only if sculpture itself could accommodate fugivity. In "An Artist's Thoughts on Conservation and Curatorial Issues" (1990), she says, "This desire to maintain the identity of form and subject, given that the subject itself is of the fugitive and unstable, appears to be inimical to the notion of preservation [she was speaking here of the actual preservation of artwork] ...or would be if there were not found, alongside the artist's admission of vulnerability, a contributing *cause* of the vulnerability, which harbours a key to the preservation of an artist's intention."⁷ No less strange is the artist's admission here of vulnerability, which Magor identifies, along with

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Liz Magor, "An Artist's Thoughts on Conservation and Curatorial Issues," this volume, 161.

its cause, as key to the meaning of work. Could we read her writing for clues to the vulnerability she left exposed there?

Lecturing here to a group of conservators on the subject of the acquisition by the National Gallery of Canada of her 1976 work *Time and Mrs. Tiber*, Magor quipped that the sculpture suggested “a parallel career for me—the first half of my life creating work; the second half overseeing its disintegration.” Immediately on purchase in 1977, *Time and Mrs. Tiber* was a conservator’s nightmare, as it was a ready-made sculpture composed from jars of preserves from the distant past: “These provisions had been put up by a West Coast homesteader in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and it was my intention to honour and preserve the evidence of Mrs. Tiber’s rescue of the crop of 1948.”⁸ In her own small way, Magor was preserving Mrs. Tiber’s story in the jars she had laid up, a feminist gesture acknowledging women’s unsung labour—or rural life and labour in general. Yet Magor herself wanted no feminist reading of any of her own work: “I think that a feminist reading of the work would be unfruitful, or at best, full of inconsistency. In fact, feminism has given me permission to be unsure, as well as digressive, unapologetic, and unauthoritative. It has helped me valorize detail, entertain the small stories and eschew the need to be at the front, or on top of, an art movement.”⁹

When she was invited in 1987 to participate in the opening exhibition of The Power Plant, Toronto’s new contemporary art gallery, portentously entitled *Toronto: A Play of History*, this valorizing, entertaining, and eschewing came into counter-play. Magor enlisted her students at the Ontario College of Art as a shield against “the exhibition’s historicizing premise.” Together, they collaboratively fabricated one of the highlights of the exhibition, *Pulp Fiction Presents the Special Collection*, replicating in cardboard precious objects from the collection of the Royal Ontario Museum. “They have to some degree revived these things,” Magor writes in her catalogue submission, “by offering themselves as the medium through which the objects can be removed from the museum. It is only a cardboard life, but even the poverty of cardboard cannot silence communication between the original and its remake.”¹⁰ Her text is a remarkable meditation, not, you might think, on pedagogy per se, but on the “student body” as a medium, in the clairvoyant sense of what students constantly summon “from the other side.” But actually, this medium is really a screen for Magor. Acting

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Magor, “An Artist’s Thoughts on Conservation and Curatorial Issues,” this volume, 160.

9

Magor and Johnstone, “A Conversation with Liz Magor,” this volume, 310.

10

Liz Magor, “Pulp Fiction Presents the Special Collection,” this volume, 133.

on her behalf, her students collectively devalued those ritually housed artifacts that she herself wished stripped of the “history and value” they accrue when placed in museums. These recalcitrant student *subjects*, who “have an amazing capacity to resist being taught,” are really stand-ins for the recalcitrant *objects* that Magor had yet to make the subject of her practice.¹¹ Her students’ vulnerability to failure foreshadowed the debasement of objects that would be fundamental to Magor’s practice decades later when she had “a diminished need for those things to speak symbolically or profoundly.”¹²

At the same moment in 1987, Magor similarly advocated for fellow women artists, curating simultaneous projects by Corrine Corry and Joey Morgan at the Toronto artist-run gallery Mercer Union, and publishing a joint catalogue on their exhibitions with the essay “On Mercer Union, Installation, Palaces, and Shelter” (1987). In spite of the fact that she mainly addressed issues of technology in their work, her own sculptural obsessions peeked through as she was really asking questions that would be pertinent to her own later work, even if expressed negatively: on our role in granting objects transcendence; on allure as “the lubricant of the commercial world, used to move into our lives goods and services of no inherent empathetic capability.”¹³

As a sculptor, Magor was interested in production, not consumption. Like Corry and Morgan, she was privileged as an artist. But what about other women traditionally relegated to passivity? How could they represent themselves and not be mere objects of consumption? Magor’s “Auto Portrait” (1990), commissioned for the sixteenth anniversary publication of the Montreal feminist gallery La Centrale (Galerie Powerhouse), was her ambiguous answer. Ambiguous because the essay is not a self-portrait but an examination of subservience in portraiture, taking as a semiotic case study a series of women who had devoted their lives as accessories to men, modernist literary masters (Eliot, Joyce, Beckett), to whom they had served as secretaries and wives. Magor searched out the, at times rare, photographs of these women. Of Vivienne Eliot, pushed to the side in a photograph of T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf, Magor writes, “Her own body betrays her disguise and the carefully selected costume becomes a shroud for her dissolving self.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, Magor attempts to find some surreptitious agency in these women, and while she seems to parody

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Magor, “Pulp Fiction Presents the Special Collection,” this volume, 132.

12

Magor and Johnstone, “A Conversation with Liz Magor,” this volume, 307.

13

Liz Magor, “On Mercer Union, Installation, Palaces, and Shelter,” this volume, 142.

14

Liz Magor, “Auto Portrait,” this volume, 152.

“codes of fashion” in describing what they wear, it is the details and accessories of their outfits that signal to her their quiet rebellion, a “critical alternative,” even to the art world. “Fashion’s qualities are best enumerated in a kind of inverted list of what modern art is: fashion is *not* private, it *is* substantial and representational, and its trajectory is *always* described in full public view.”¹⁵ Writing this in 1990, Magor didn’t yet know how on public view, how exposed, she herself would soon become.

15
Magor, “Auto Portrait,” this volume, 157.

On the surface, Magor’s residence in Toronto seemed to be a success, but the art scene’s developing intellectual milieu affected her deeply. She had moved to Toronto to escape the influence of the photo-conceptualism of the so-called Vancouver School. She hadn’t realized arriving in Toronto “that a huge shift was under way as the influence of critical theory was about to overwhelm the city. It was an enormous force, like a big wave that washed over everything. Conventional art-making kind of stalled”—and eventually so did she.¹⁶

16
Magor and Johnstone, “A Conversation with Liz Magor,” this volume, 310.

Her 1986 installation *Regal Decor* was doubt written large. It was a huge work that seemed to manifest the artist’s interest in making production and consumption visible, but here only as a simulation. Its life-size faux printing press and fake columns of linoleum stood in stark contrast to the bourgeois living room mocked up in the blown-up prop of a photographic mural of a double spread from *House & Garden* magazine. The distressed figure of a sleeping woman has been collaged into the magazine image, within one of its picture frames, as if one of Charcot’s photographs of hysterical sleep (actually it was an image of a woman in labour). A surrogate auto-portrait perhaps of Magor’s own artistic dilemma? No text answered to this work, except for a long interview with fellow artist Ian Carr-Harris published in 1986. She takes Carr-Harris, a critic as well as a sculptor/installation artist, to task for his role in the new moralistic prescriptiveness of criticism. Her disquiet is evident throughout the interview, and we can read between the lines what else was bothering her: the return to a commodity-oriented sculpture often taking the form of commodities! Variousy labelled Neo-Conceptualism, Simulationism, Neo Geo, Smart Art, or Cute Commodity, this was a New York phenomenon that also had a sales pavilion in Toronto at The Power Plant, in the form of the 1987 exhibition *Active Surplus*, in which Magor participated with her 1987 work *Baker’s Showcase*, and which,

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Magor, "Home and Native Land," this volume, 175.

she notes, surprised her by its failure.¹⁷ These sculptures were actually the lure she argued against:

I'm not talking about transcendental images or supercharged images. I'm actually talking about the very opposite: a place where the material world *isn't* charged with special significance; where it's almost a pre-commodity; where your production and consumption are happening at the same time. When they are separated, it seems to me we are then vulnerable to being attracted to objects that *have* been charged with significance, and perhaps not through our own means. So our only response is on a transcendental, an "auratic" level.... That's why I think that critical prescription, in attempting to be "meaningful" and to be "communicative," is inappropriate or overstressed; because I'm not sure how communicable certain things are—or of the value of communicating at certain stages.¹⁸

18

"Liz Magor in Discussion with Ian Carr-Harris," this volume, 114.

Her answers to these issues that so vexed her would come much later in the work she made twenty years on, but in the meantime she felt alienated from the critical and aesthetic milieu. "Eventually I felt a need to remove myself from theoretical discussion, to retreat." Retreat meant moving back to Vancouver in 1993. "My move back to Vancouver was synonymous with dropping out of art," she said.¹⁹ But before her move, her situation was compounded by a new crisis.

19

Magor and Johnstone, "A Conversation with Liz Magor," this volume, 312.

In searching for a way out of her artistic malaise of the late 1980s, Magor fell upon some photographs she had made as a student twenty years earlier of her and her hippie friends going "back to the land." She ironically *détourned* the photographs with captions lifted from Edward S. Curtis's monumental publication *The North American Indian*, allying Curtis, her friends, and herself in a critique of their collective romanticizing fiction of the past. The prints were then shown as *Field Work* in the Canadian Biennial of Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Canada in 1989. "What I had intended as an exposure of a recurring and enduring folly, others saw as a case of cultural appropriation, and I was pulled up on the carpet and treated to a big correction."²⁰ Appropriation art's irony did not pass uncriticized in the appropriation of voice crisis starting that very year.

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Magor and Johnstone, "A Conversation with Liz Magor," this volume, 312.

She was called out for *Field Work* and another piece she had exhibited with it, *Child's Sweater*, for stealing her material. According to various critics, she had “‘poached on Native culture,’ ‘appropriated the pain of others,’ ‘effected a second erasure of the native presence,’ and ‘used the stories of others without permission.’”²¹ She didn’t try to duck the controversy but faced it head on, taking it seriously, as much as it was obviously debilitating for her. “Home and Native Land” (1992) was her public response. Since the essay originally was a panel presentation, she pointed out the irony of her context: “Answering to the designation ‘privileged’ is a new responsibility for me, since up to this time, my role on a panel addressing issues of contemporary art would be to represent the marginalized—in my case, women—and I would have found mine as the only female name on the roster.” She didn’t try to excuse her otherwise feminist strategies of appropriation, which she outlines here, but, long before others, considered what her white privilege meant—and what would need, in her practice, to change. “For me, these are the critical questions. It’s not an issue of borrowing, or poaching, or appropriation, but a question of identifying, questioning, and re-ordering all the myth, fact, and fantasy that we are stuffed with.” This deep personal excavation of her own possession by the national psyche would need to be “a project of relinquishment.”²² Stuff had to go.

We think of Liz Magor as a sculptor, but this crisis led to a swerve that took her into photography for a decade. It also took her into a diversion through American history as if her project of relinquishment initially could only be pictured at a distance through another, more dominant culture that had more ready purchase on the ideological imagination.²³ Through the faux equivalence of silver-gelatin prints, she began to document the phenomenon of re-enactors, living history hobbyists who played out scenes from American Civil War battles and camp life. It’s hard to know, following the crisis around *Field Work*, whether she took this quest as redemption or justification, but it issued in her thematically most sustained series of writing.

In the first of these, “February 20, 1864” (1992) and “Military Through the Ages” (1994), she sketches the weekend warrior’s pursuit of past glory. She ponders the motivations. Re-enactors aren’t at all duplicitous. “Most of them don’t assume that a costume is the same as a persona. In fact, their efforts lead more toward expression than

21

Magor, “Home and Native Land,” this volume, 176.

22

Magor, “Home and Native Land,” this volume, 177–78. She revisited her settler predicament in “Maple Leaf Confectionary,” this volume 195–200.

23

But consider *Siberian Husky* (1990) and *Boas and Others* (1991) as starting to engage this project through the theme of the North.

24

Liz Magor, "February 20, 1864," this volume, 185.

25

Magor, "February 20, 1864," this volume, 185.

26

Liz Magor, "The Forces of Wolfe and Montcalm," this volume, 228.

27

Magor, "February 20, 1864," this volume, 187.

28

Liz Magor, "White House Paint," this volume, 205.

29

Liz Magor, "Military Through the Ages," this volume, 215.

30

Liz Magor, "Messenger," this volume, 209. The relation between the re-enactor photographs and sculpture was already prefigured in that between *Field Work* (1989) and *Cabin in the Snow* (1989).

concealment."²⁴ Mainly, re-enactment satisfies a fetish for authenticity. "With a story of epic proportions provided, the participants are free to concentrate their attention on material details like clothing and equipment. Invariably, this concoction of the rhetorical and the literal serves to stimulate emotional response, sometimes to an extreme degree."²⁵ She probes participants' psychology, or is it a pathology, in order to answer the question of the emotional, not recreational, investment of "players in a game of hide-and-seek. They hide by living imaginatively in another era. I seek, looking for what drives them to escape their time."²⁶

But for Magor, "it's something else that makes me uncomfortable." It is the worry what other, personal, histories might be disclosed—the way she sometime sees her gestures as uncannily mimicry of her parents. "The feelings that accompany this experience are disturbing, a mixture of awe and disgust." She is worried by re-enactors' devotion to repetition, what she herself had earlier played out in *Four Boys and a Girl*, in seeking to become their ancestors. Eventually, she dismisses the whole social enterprise of living history as a "folly," but wonders whether "the costumes, the buildings, the gear and all the retold tales are really part of an elaborate ruse." Does innocent escapism mask an unconscious delusion? "I get a little closer to the source of my discomfort, but I'm still left wondering what anxious psyche this stratagem is meant to conceal and whether or not it is confined to provincial parks and past events."²⁷

Don't confine the phenomenon to re-enacting, Magor then suggests; "render it domestic," include us all.²⁸ She began to look a bit closer to home—to the home, in fact—with her complementary texts "White House Paint" (1996) and "Messenger" (1996). Once a uniform's "bits of braids and baize that allow the player to toy with his vulnerability" provided the "protective exoskeleton for a tender organism."²⁹ But now, reflecting on a general consumer obsession epitomized for her by Ralph Lauren, Magor sought more secure shelter in her return to sculpture of sorts with the installations *Messenger* (1996) and *One Bedroom Apartment* (1996). "With the threat of invasion seeping through our walls, we dream of solid enclosures. Turning inward for comfort, we form a carapace to shield our soft centre."³⁰

In case you are wondering what happened to the sculptor during this period of photography, Magor might as well have been talking here about the sculpture she would soon be making. “Whatever the cause, the instinct to pull into the shell is strong. Introversion seeks its form.”³¹ For already her re-enactment writing about authenticity displayed in details of costuming, about the discord between the assumption of the austere signifiers of the past and the realities of a flabby present was, in fact, setting out parameters for considering sculpture as a shell between “outside” and “inside.” Here in writing one could derive new concepts for sculpture, as operations aligned to its material practice. As Magor said in a 2016 interview, “It’s not about topics, it’s about operations.”³²

Her re-enactor photographs were unlikely research in sculptural technique. “Great pains are taken with detail. But for all the attention, it is detail that ultimately undoes the illusion,”³³ Magor discloses of participants’ uniforms and gear; and of her images themselves, she admits in an unpublished text, “A kind of ungluing of the parts of the image takes place showing a gap between authenticity and artifice.”³⁴ Resemblance and dissemblance float confusedly, entwined together in the separating image, separation itself the flickering illusive moment of the simulacrum.

The turning in of retreat was really a turning inside out of a soldier’s uniform. The inversion of its protective shell exposed a vulnerable interior. Here was a basis for sculpture as cast and mould intimately articulate this relationship. Sculpture turns inside out in the casting process. Both introversion *and* extroversion seek their form in the self-same shell, the sustaining shape a hinge between dissemblance and resemblance, of concealing and revealing, an identity, too, between form and subject.

Magor soon developed a new casting technique with *Hollow* (1998–99). *Hollow* is a sculpture all about hiding in plain sight, about concealing oneself in the very conditions of exposure. This casting technique is uncannily like the photographic process of pulling a print from a negative. The inside-out world of the mould invites the world back in, not as an image as in photography, but as a “real” thing.³⁵ There is no costumed camaraderie of re-enactors, the outer envelope of costuming pretending association, but a mere mute thing clinging

31
Magor, “White House Paint,” this volume, 203.

32
Magor and Johnstone, “A Conversation with Liz Magor,” this volume, 314.

33
Magor, “Military Through the Ages,” this volume, 214.

34
Liz Magor, “House Plant,” this volume, 190.

35
The technique is Magor’s invention. Since a silicone rubber mould carries static electricity, when Magor selectively brushes the interior of a mould with dry pigment, the colour holds in position and bonds to the casting medium, and thus a realistically coloured “object” appears as the ensuing cast.

to the world. It answered Magor's need, too, to cleave to the world while letting go of securities.

Later, in 2002, in the catalogue essay "Faint," Magor wrote about a "heaved out" inversion that befalls an ordered and unquestioned storage system, where what upholds collapses: "when there is a shift, an emptying out, a move or a collapse, the layers [be it bookshelves or cabinet drawers or the house itself] move away from each other, revealing their insubstantiality, their provisional and pathetic identity."³⁶ There was a moment, it seems, when Magor welcomed this inversion, even provoked it perhaps. (*One Bedroom Apartment*, with its piled storage of such, was a way station.) There had been too much accumulation. Too many details, too many provisions had piled up during the re-enactor period. It was time to strip down to the basics, to the bare essentials, with nothing but an overcoat, so to speak, for protection.

Heaving out had a liberating effect. In the late 1990s, Magor began again, doubts dispensed; the long detour of the re-enactor period had served its purpose. She returned to sculpture once more. Her writing, too, consequently changed. It was no longer a worrying probe. A sense of calm descends; she writes with a knowing perspicuity. Several pieces are sympathetic catalogue essays on fellow artists, sympathetic in the sense of subtly mimicking in writing her colleagues' artistic processes. Writing again on the same artists, such as Corrine Corry ("The Lenticular," 2002), longstanding themes are revisited, such as "the impossibility of individuation combined with the inevitability of difference."³⁷ Writing on new artists, such as Rita McBride ("On Rita McBride," 2004), Magor sees how the artist "assembles us" in an "enforced passivity" akin not to retreat but, Magor writes, to Graham Greene using the upheaval of long-distance travel as a means of "escaping the gravity of his own identity through the promise of the unpredictable and the reorganization of his habitual character."³⁸ Or writing on the work of Rhonda Wepler ("Faint," 2002), Magor sounds out shared constructive—or deconstructive—concerns: "We slide from the melancholy of times past to the prevalent crappiness of contemporary consumerism." As if writing on her own current work or that to come, Magor says, "It's easy to project character—smart, stupid, sad—onto these sculptures; to see them as excerpts from a story of crisis or collapse. While there is an obvious danger of obscuring

36

Liz Magor, "Faint," this volume, 246. Also see "To Liz Mulholland," for Magor's discussion of her 1990s work in terms of this restrictive building up and liberating heaving out (as a loss of identity). The ultimate heaving out, of course, is death, "and in that file I would place the bulk of my work." Liz Magor, "To Liz Mulholland," this volume, 298.

37

Liz Magor, "The Lenticular," this volume, 242.

38

Liz Magor, "On Rita McBride," this volume, 252.

presence and formal ideas with this narrative drive, the value here is in the consideration of the mutability of the material world and the role it plays in our coming to know ourselves.”³⁹ Coming to know ourselves might mean letting go of narratives in order to let things stand bare, bereft of our projective needs.

39
Magor, “Faint,” this volume, 248.

Then, in 2006, Magor writes “Ancient Affections,” a remarkable catalogue essay on the ceramicist Paul Mathieu. His eccentric project consisted of taking a replica of a Matisse portrait bust to the Chinese ceramic city of Jingdezhen to be repeatedly recast and variously jobbed out for decoration as piece work in order to serve, upside down, on its return, as a vase. “Paul Mathieu hazarded a way to mingle this strange (in China) form with the most regular of the city’s artistic production.”⁴⁰ Magor knew the casting tricks Mathieu idiosyncratically trades on, and she knew what a spanner in the works his proposition might be for Chinese artisans whose “interest is not in process but in reliable repeatability and they know how to produce an object efficiently with very little variation or failure.” Accordingly, “neither originality nor replication rules” these hybrid vessels. Magor wonders whether Mathieu’s ceramics were designed to “mis-fit,” and she imagines the social life of these things as they might circulate, even to the doorstep where she is writing this text from her then residence on the edge of Vancouver’s Chinatown, to be reposed in the porcelain shops there. In themselves, these repositories might be pondered on.

40
Liz Magor, “Ancient Affections,” this volume, 257.

Forever, their shelves hold the same type and amount of material. If something leaves, it is replaced with something identical. This is a different kind of retail; something like an archive, or a museum.

These stores resemble museums because they work with the classical and the traditional, but in contrast to museums they don’t cherish and hold, nor do they worry about quality or provenance.⁴¹

41
Magor, “Ancient Affections,” this volume, 256.

Replicas eschew their commodity status, void of anticipatory affect for their prospective buyers. Whereas if placed amongst them, Mathieu’s porcelains might operate differently, she says, “Because as they slip from one category to another they leave a trace, an afterimage of our expectation of things.”⁴²

42
Magor, “Ancient Affections,” this volume, 261.

The reversal of expectation as a re-evaluation of *things* is the issue here. To this end, Magor quotes cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai: “Thus, even though from a *theoretical* point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a *methodological* point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context.”⁴³ Magor’s sculpture of the last twenty years, and the writing that accompanies it, posits this new object relation as things-in-motion between states of being.

43

Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 5.

Objects serve our needs. Objects exist variously on a continuum of *our* desiring and having—and then discarding—which lends them value depending on our possession of them. Advocating for the lowly object in *The Capilano Review*, Magor argues that, just like human beings, objects belong to a class system stratified along the lines of privilege and servitude. “I look at objects in the world, noting that some enjoy privilege while others are made to serve.”⁴⁴ The works she makes in 2007–08 are exemplars of this hierarchy and rude reversals at the same time, while those made in 2011 express her “below stairs” solidarity: “If I invent a class system for textile products,” she writes, “I would probably put dresses at the top and towels at the bottom. Towels are like trays and dishes. Does that make dresses like cigarettes and candies? Dresses are princesses. Anyhow, I’m pretty sure that towels, sheets and blankets are like cutlery, dishes and trays; a kind of servant class.”⁴⁵

44

Liz Magor, “Statement for *The Capilano Review*,” this volume, 290.

45

Liz Magor, “About Blankets; Kings and Queens,” this volume, 268.

Things, on the other hand, are the leftovers of objects. In her 2018 Stonecroft Lecture, Magor acknowledges that she is interested in things that are “full and empty at the same time. Full, thanks to the relentless production of ‘meaning’ within a culture, and empty due to the persistent failure of things to hold on to those intentions.”⁴⁶ She herself runs on empty. Articles at the end of their lifespan serve her sculptural purpose best, those whose affect is depleted and influence negated since we now treat them as garbage, as mere disposable things. Yet what remains as residue uncannily restores the thing to itself, as damaged as it might be. (Magor finds these no longer loved things abandoned in thrift stores: stuffed animals, clothing, crafts, etc.) Their mute uncanniness drew the artist’s attention. She wanted to give back some love “to restore a range of emotion to these sad things, in order to ameliorate the passionless desire that created them in the first place.”⁴⁷

46

Liz Magor, “Stonecroft Lecture,” this volume, 324.

47

Magor, “Stonecroft Lecture,” this volume 332.

Rather than finding them rivals to her activity, as she said decades earlier of *Four Boys and a Girl*, Magor now negotiates with things. She lends their damaged forms a sculptural life as reward for their endurance. “In the studio I might rearrange the relationship between things in order to increase their power, or I make adjustments to restore their depleted importance. I always assume that material is co-operative, and process is the way to reach and understand the latent intelligence of things.”⁴⁸ Rather than still worrying the world of things, she makes them accomplices to her task.

48

Magor, “Statement for *The Capilano Review*,” this volume, 290.

You can worry words, too. You can worry a word to let it go. What then would be analogous in Magor’s writing to the letting go she has made of objects? Rather than worrying words to make sure they “cleave to intended meaning,” she would let go their presumed grip to find other resources in language. As a young artist, she “used writing as a way to stop the confusion and hold things down.” As an older artist, she says, “I see the folly of such control and I use writing as a way to accept it.” Was writing not like casting? Taking advantage of double meaning of *to cleave*, we could say that her writing at one time cleaved to meaning whereas now it cleaves from it. “Writing helps me pry apart,” she says, the very same way a cast cleaves from a mould with the same end of “submitting to the real.”⁴⁹

49

Magor, “Author’s Note,” this volume xi.



What People Do for Work

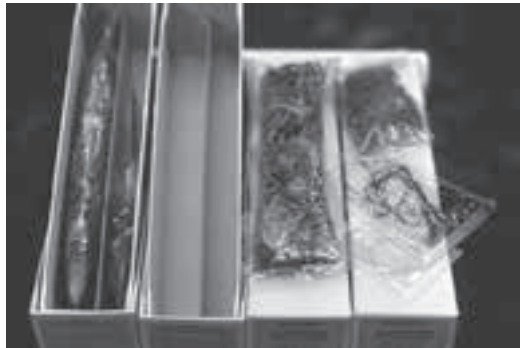
Published by the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria for the exhibition
Liz Magor, April 27–May 22, 1977. In the printed version,
“when everyone is gone for good” was incorrectly reproduced
as “when everyone is gone for food”

I am interested in what people do for work. Not what they do for a job, but what occupation obsesses them. What they spend most of their time doing or thinking about. What tools they use, how they use them, how tools work, what they make.

I am interested in animals that make things, what they make, what tools they use, why they make them. When animals make things, I wonder if they think or don't think. I think they don't think.

When people and animals are not around, I see the work they have done and what they have made and I can easily confuse who made what and why they made it and what tools they used and how they used them. So, in the end, when everyone is gone for good, south or wherever people go, it's what they made and what tools they used that I have left. That's what obsesses me.

WHAT PEOPLE DO FOR WORK





Production/ Reproduction

Published by the Vancouver Art Gallery for the exhibition
Production/Reproduction, October 24–November 23, 1980.
Reprinted in the catalogue for *Liz Magor*, an exhibition at the Alberta
College of Art Gallery, Calgary, September 10–October 7, 1981

I am always looking for comfort in a world disturbingly subject to change. Sometimes I find it in work, as a recording of my activity. Sometimes I find it in objects, things that sit still for a while and slowly gather, then release, their history. I wanted to do a work that would objectify some history of a life or at least the life of a body and the process of change that affects the body.

While I can only parallel the events of natural history, there is modest consolation found in effecting a real change in the material of the work; forcing it to form, to repeat, to reorder its appearance. Perhaps through this manipulation, I am participating in the process of change that continues whether or not I consent or involve myself. Perhaps I am working to be part of the workings of change.

However, in an essential way my insecurity is unrelieved by this small play of power as the irony of my situation is revealed. For while I use this work to make manifest some aspects of a personal history, I find I have simultaneously manufactured my own competition as the pieces themselves take the opportunity to manifest *their* history, their own generation and transformation. The stories I have assigned become accessory, and what is more, my ability to alter form appears in itself merely parallel of how I too am altered.





Like a Tune

Written in 1981 for the work *Dorothy – A Resemblance*, published in *Ten Years Later*, the catalogue for an exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, November 25–December 20, 1986

Like a tune, Dorothy Thomas's account of her life—"I have always weighed 98 lbs..."—was accepted without remark. In striking a cadence of cause and effect the merging of materials with the immaterial seemed logical, practical. Enhanced by measurement, Dorothy's sense of herself seemed not deluded.

Still like a tune, her account played itself over until the rhythm of country wisdom receded and another sense of Dorothy's perception emerged; "I have always weighed 98 lbs. Except for when I didn't. When I didn't I was a close but not-quite me. I struggled with circumstances and feeling to regain myself. I suffered the uneasy alliance. I said 'we' when I meant 'I.' By force of will and with an eye to a standard, I defied all the would-be me's and restored myself to myself. The Dorothys of aberrant weights have been discredited by my success, their tenancy is almost forgotten. I can say now, without fear of contradiction, 'I have always weighed 98 lbs.'"



THE MOST SHE WEIGHED



Prepared for an exhibition at the Glenbow Museum, Calgary,
April 1–May 29, 1983



A catalogue of work by Liz Magor

The most notable difference is that Kathleen appears to be more affected or sophisticated in manner. She wears long earrings, has red fingernails and has her hair in a fringe. She types her letters in brown typing ink and signs them in ink of the same colour.

Madge is a trifle plumper and shorter.

Although neither of them liked school, Rodney got on better, and at work he operates a more complicated machine than Barry.

For the past six years Christine has been working in a confectioner's shop. Nina started to work in a confectioner's shop but preferred working in a shoe shop.

Nina says she is definitely not religious, Christine would not go so far as to say that.

Madelaine takes sugar in her tea, Lillian gave this up in the war.

SUBJECT TO CHANGE



I have always weighed 98 lbs.



I have always weighed 98 lbs. Once I weighed more. When I was first married I weighed 124 lbs.



I have always weighed 98 lbs. Once I weighed more. When I was first married I weighed 124 lbs. But that year we worked so hard taking those darn boats up and down, that I lost some of that weight and went down to 98 lbs.



I have always weighed 98 lbs. Once I weighed more. When I was first married I weighed 124 lbs. But that year we worked so hard taking those darn boats up and down, that I lost some of that weight and went down to 98 lbs. And I stayed there 60 years, until this trouble with my eyes. After my operation I was down to 82 lbs.

SUBJECT TO CHANGE



But I thought, this is no good; and I got myself back up to 98 lbs.
and that's where I am now.

They dress smartly and look young for their age, taking great care of their complexion, their clothes and their figure. When seen they wore brightly coloured summer frocks.

One husband has noted how neither finishes her potatoes, however little she has been given.

They are of good intelligence, but found they could not settle down to learning shorthand and typing. They were weak at arithmetic and they were scared of swimming.

They like to wear clean, white shirts, even when doing dirty work.

They both used to get the feeling for example when running to school, that someone was following them. Their eyes have an almost wild or scared look about them, darting from place to place.

They never read. They used to go dancing a good deal.



*...I lost some of that weight
and went down to 98 lbs.*

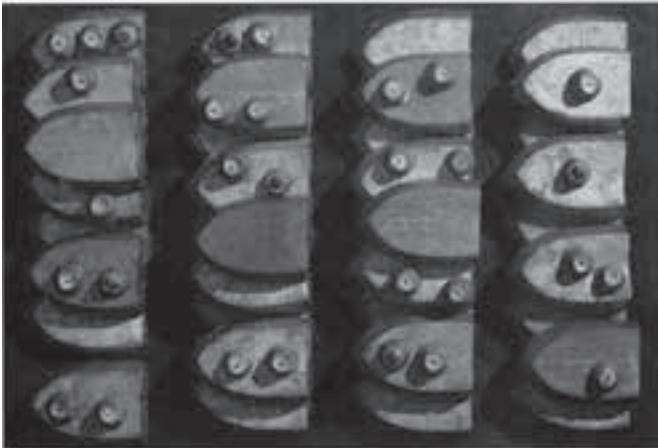


*...when I was first
married I weighed 124 lbs.*





*... after my operation
I was down to 82 lbs.*



*... I got myself back up to
98 lbs. again and that's
where I am now*

SUBJECT TO CHANGE



Sometimes I wonder how a sculpture would be if it had a very reduced physical presence— a work that may be overlooked because it is small or low, obscured or inaccessible. Or, a work that appears to be an object so familiar that it has little claim to uniqueness and attention. Added to this is the understanding that while I initially identify an object by its physical appearance, however faint, a sense of that identity persists even when the object is not present or is physically altered.

Some years ago, a woman told me the history of the weight of her body. Although she had lived a long time her body weight had changed only a few times and on the whole she maintained a weight of 98 lbs.

She identified with the body that weighed 98 lbs.

Of course, she was still herself when she weighed less or more, but not so completely herself. When she weighed 98 lbs. she more closely resembled the person she thought of as herself.

Recently, an event occurred that again affected the weight of this woman. She became ill and lay in her small cabin, unnoticed for several days. She put out a distress flag, but because it didn't resemble in placement or in form what had been agreed upon, it didn't communicate as intended to her neighbours and it was only by chance that she was rescued.

This story has qualities in common with my concerns.

In previous work I have wanted to objectify the history of a body and the process of change that affects that body. I have chosen a material way to communicate my understanding of a physical condition. The means I use may communicate by agreement or by chance, or may go unnoticed.

For me, these common qualities constitute a resemblance between my activity and this event, and I anticipate that through a representation of some aspects of the story I can articulate the nature of identity as I understand it.







I go out and back every day, or several times a day if I'm pulling in logs.

So hard taking those
damn boats up and
down that I lost some
of that weight and went
down to 93 lbs.

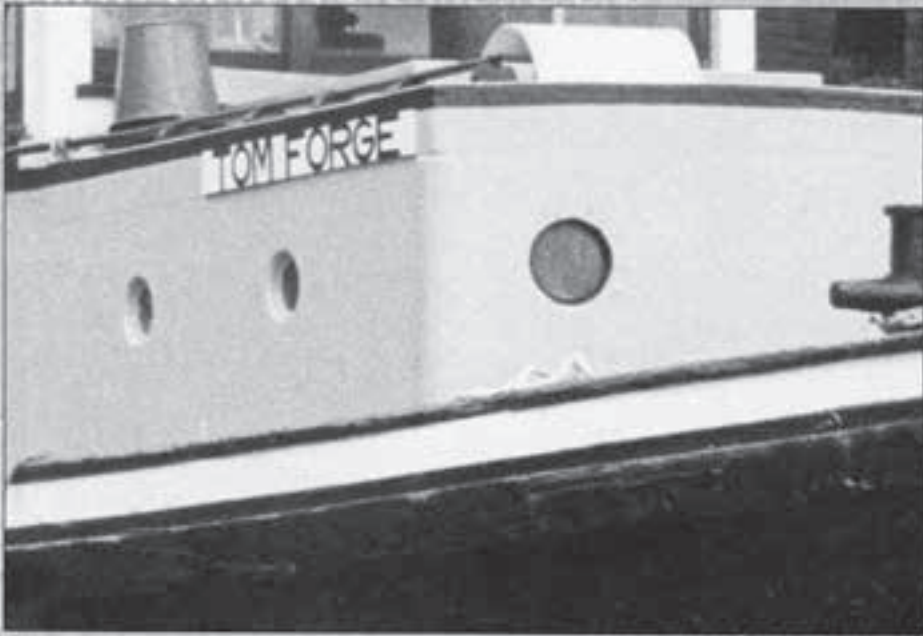
I have always
93 lbs. One
more. When
I started I was



It's difficult to get out of here. There's no way by land, you go by water to get in and to get out. It's such a lot of bother getting down to the water on the low tide that I wait for the highs. I do all my coming and going on the high tide.

I weighed
I weighed
I was first
up to 124 lbs.

but I thought "this is no
good" and I got myself
back up to 93 lbs.
that's where I am now

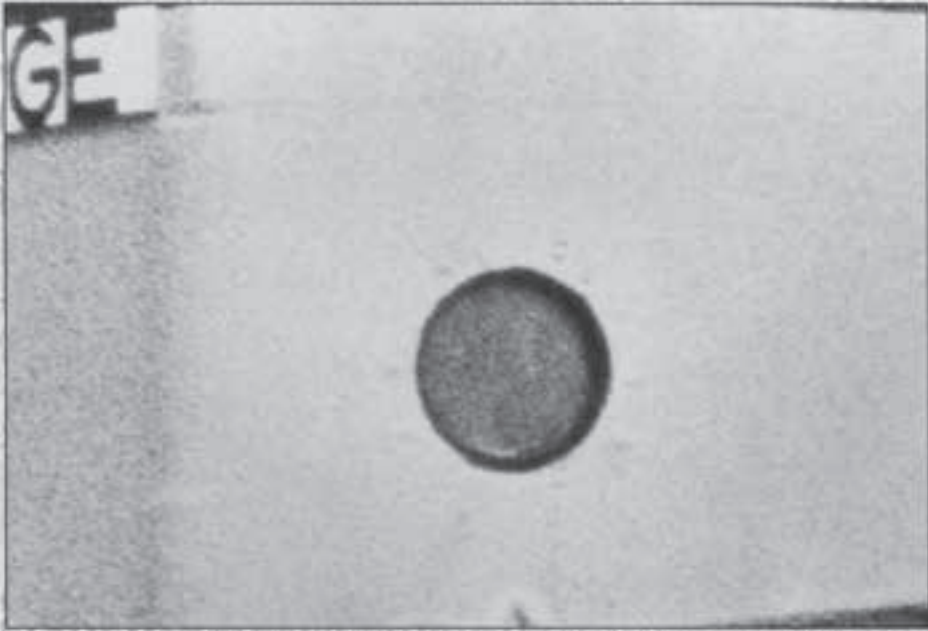


I keep an eye on her. She's too old I think, to be way out here and on her own too. But she's been here a long time and she's determined to stick. So I take a look each time past. Checking to see there's no change, no sign of trouble.

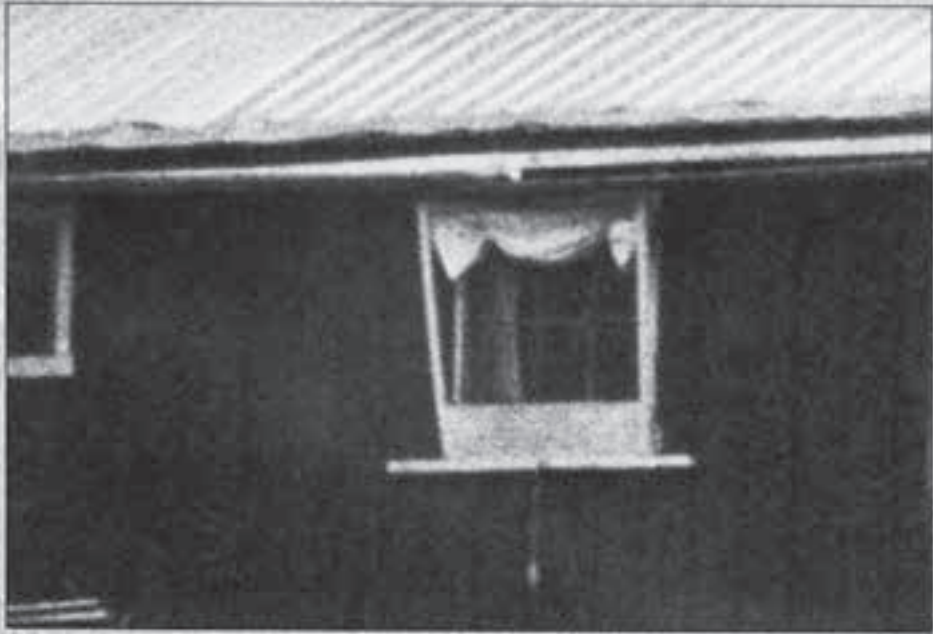
And I stayed there, 60 years until this trouble with my eyes. After my operation I was only 82, but I didn't go in because I was out on the flat on the



Sunday is a day for visitors. But I don't need much company, it's enough just to see the Tom Forge going back and forth. That's my idea of a neighbour.



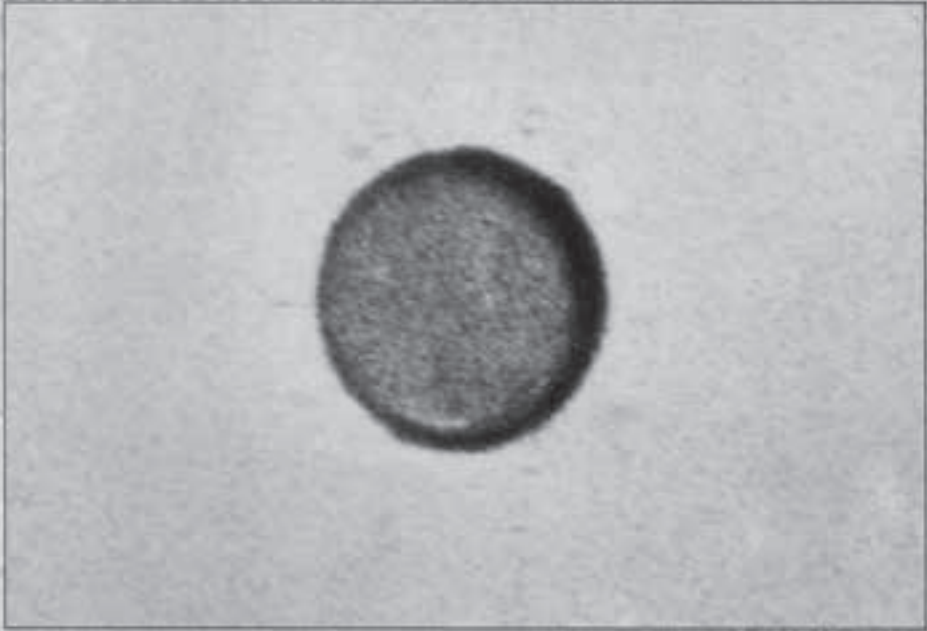
When she came back here after her eye operation I told her that if she ever needed help she should hang a dishcloth out her kitchen window, a white dishcloth.



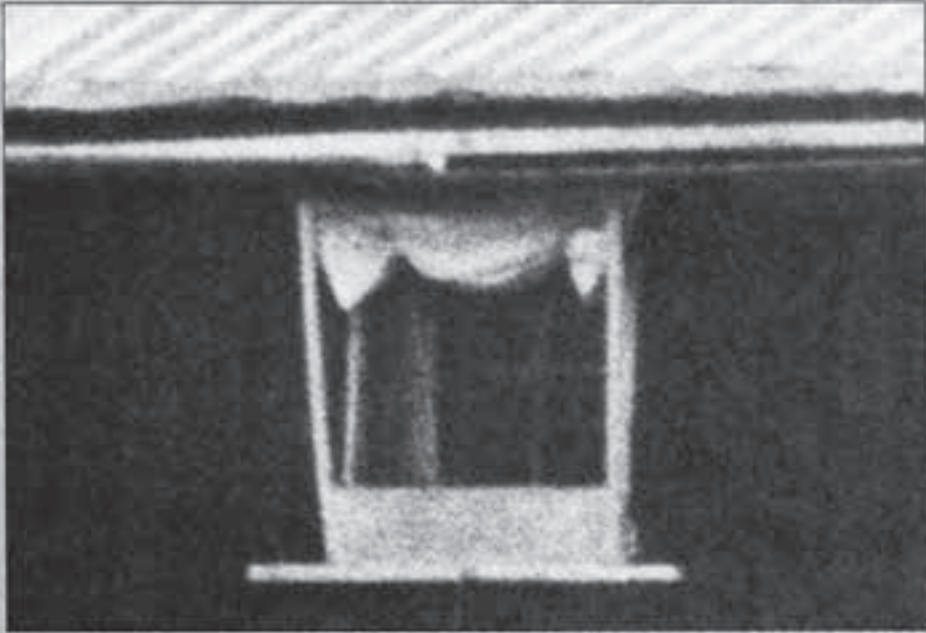
I was worried. I felt so weak. That's why I put the flag out, a signal to the Tom Forge. I put it out on the beach and then just had to go in and lie down.

s weighed
I weighed
I was first
up to 124 lbs.

But I thought "this is no
good" and I got myself
back up to 98 lbs.
That's where I am now.



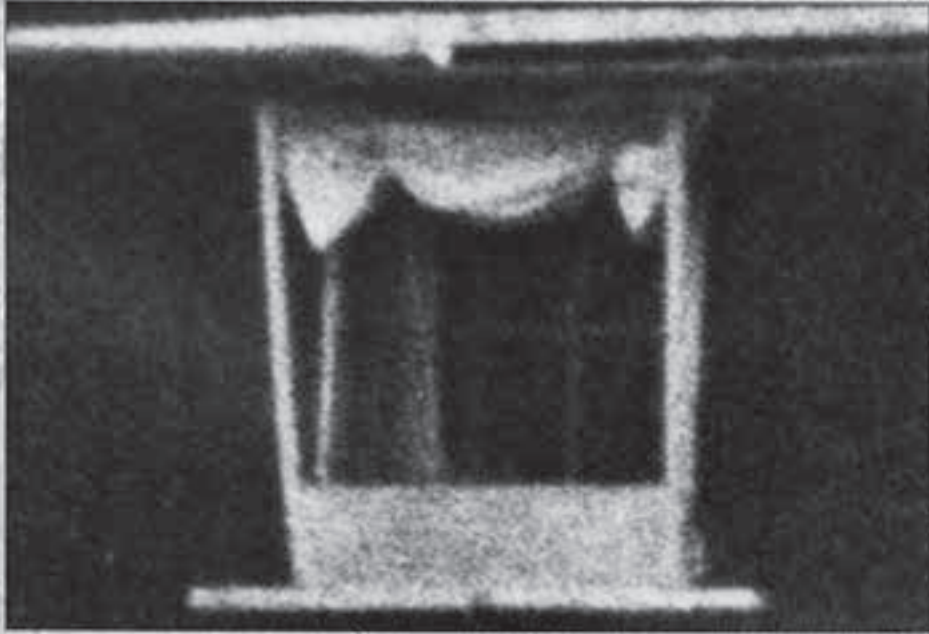
She was sick. She put out a distress flag, but she just put it on the beach, lying flat on the beach. That's okay for planes but not for boats, so I didn't see it for a few days. Besides, I was always looking for a dishcloth in the window, I looked for it every time I went past.



Every day I could hear the Tom Forge going back and forth, but nobody showed up. Looking at something else I guess, staring at the water I suppose.



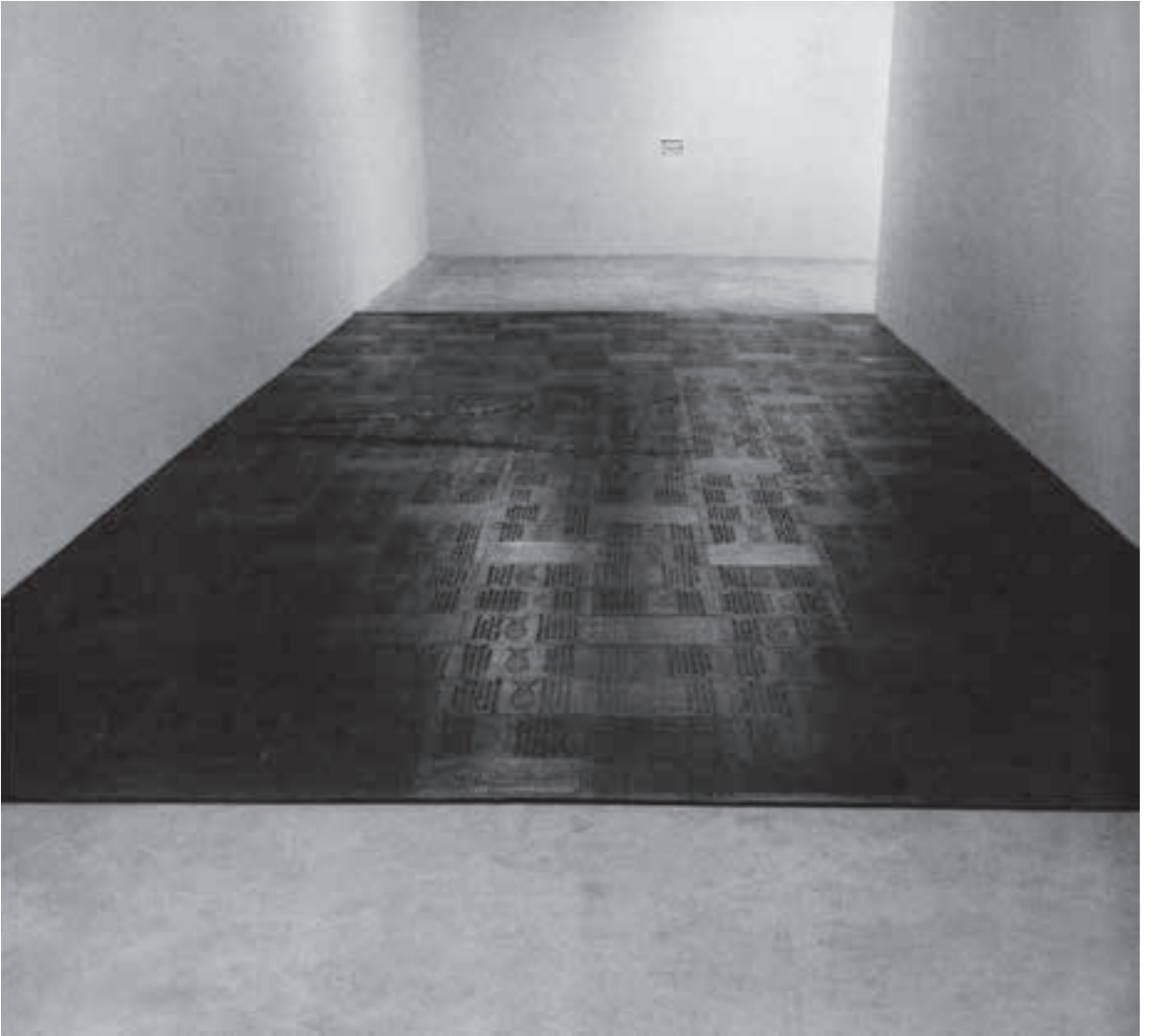
I went to shore. I saw the flag on the beach and knew right away what it meant. I went into the house and she was lying on the bed. She looked so small and thin.



I have always weighed 98 lbs. Once I weighed more, when I was first married I weighed 124 lbs. But that year we worked so hard taking those darn boats up and down that I lost some of that weight and went down to 98 lbs. And I stayed there, 60 years, until this trouble with my eyes. After my operation I was down to 82 lbs. But I thought to myself "this is no good" and I got myself back up to 98 lbs. again and that's where I am now.

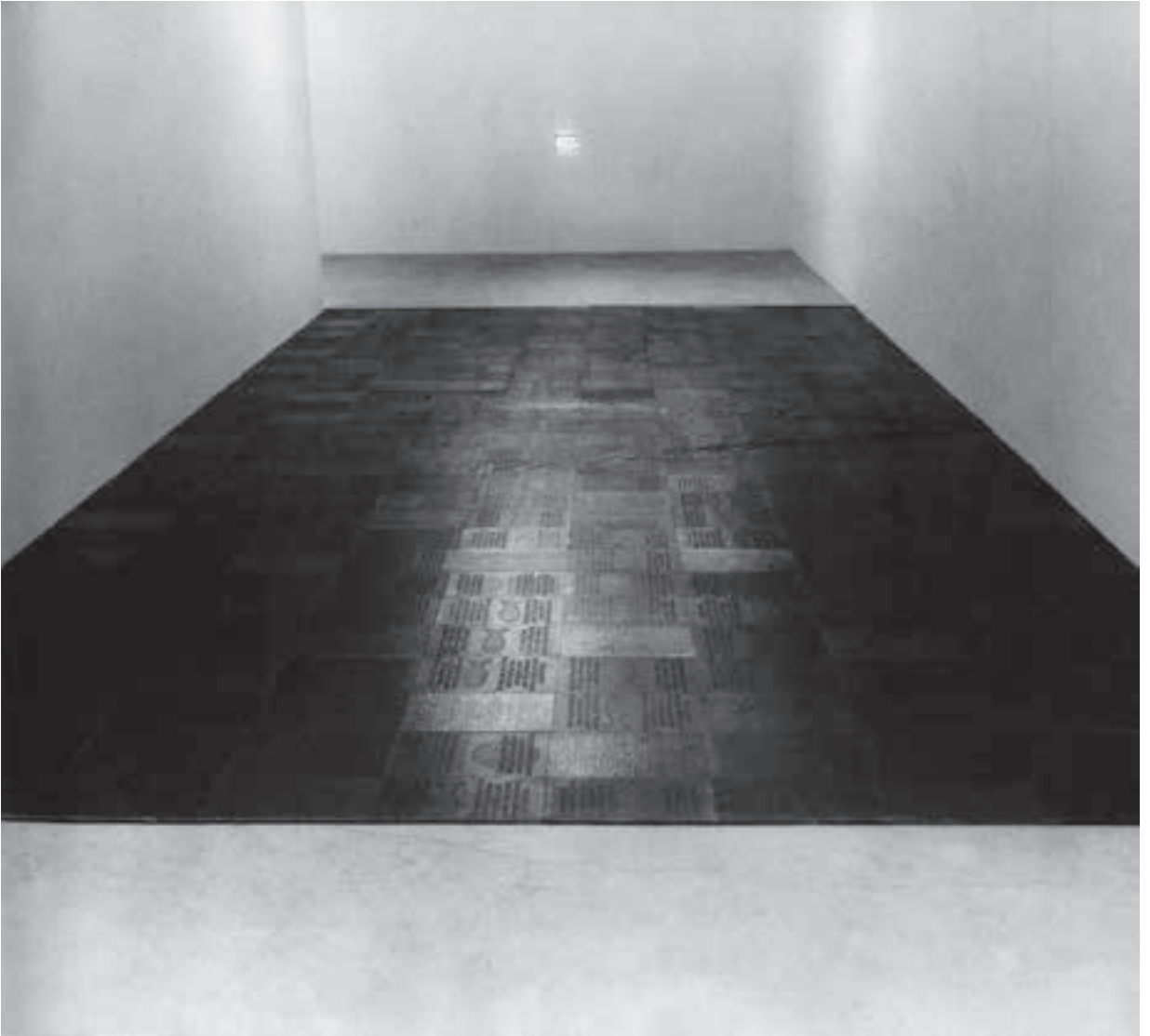












The artist would like to thank The Canada Council for its generous support
and to extend special thanks
to Dorothy Thomas and Pat Lovell.



Glenbow Museum

prepared for an exhibition at the



Glenbow Museum, Apr. 1 – May 29, 1983

THE LEAST SHE WEIGHED





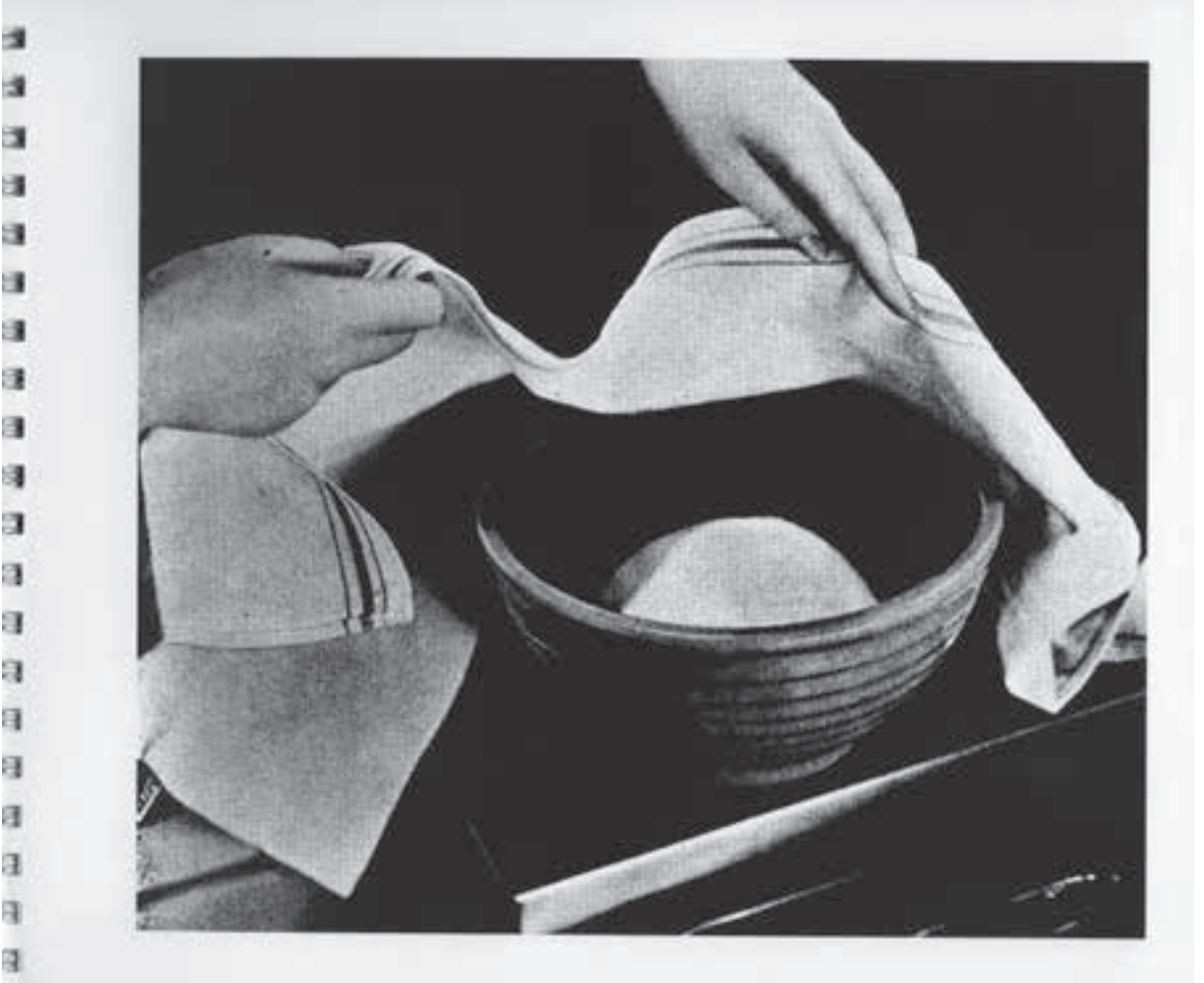
Self-published, 1983







FOUR NOTABLE BAKERS

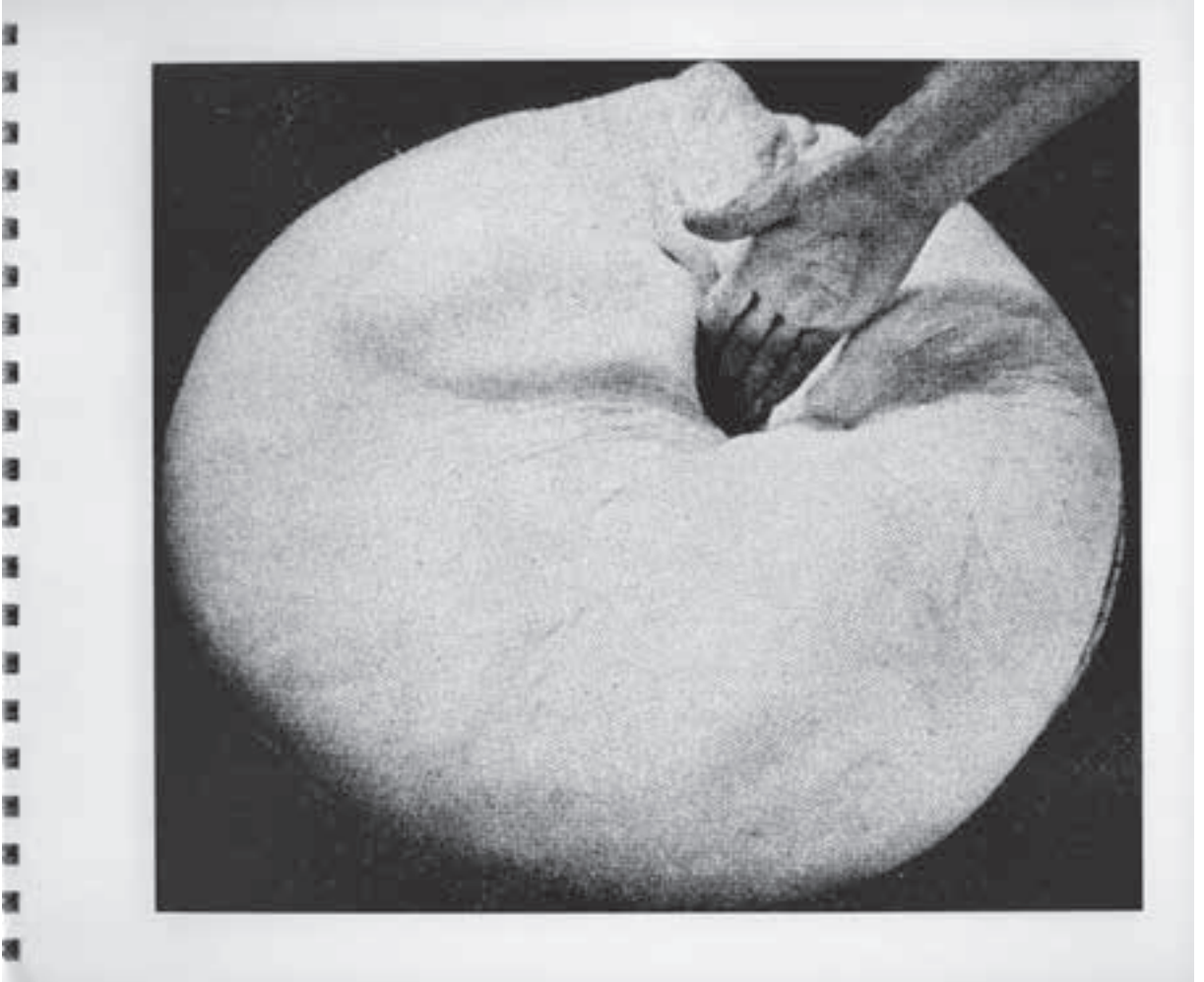




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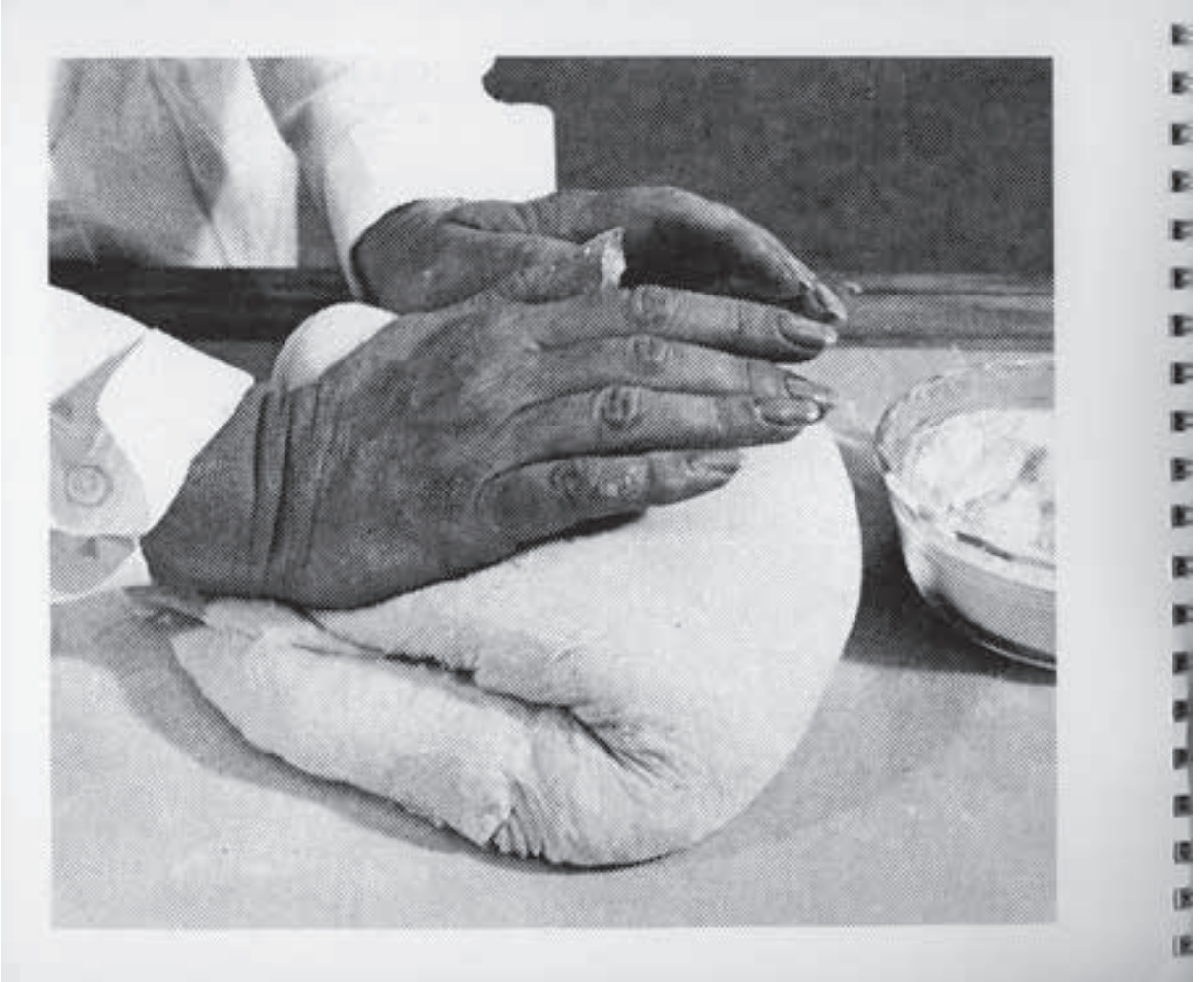






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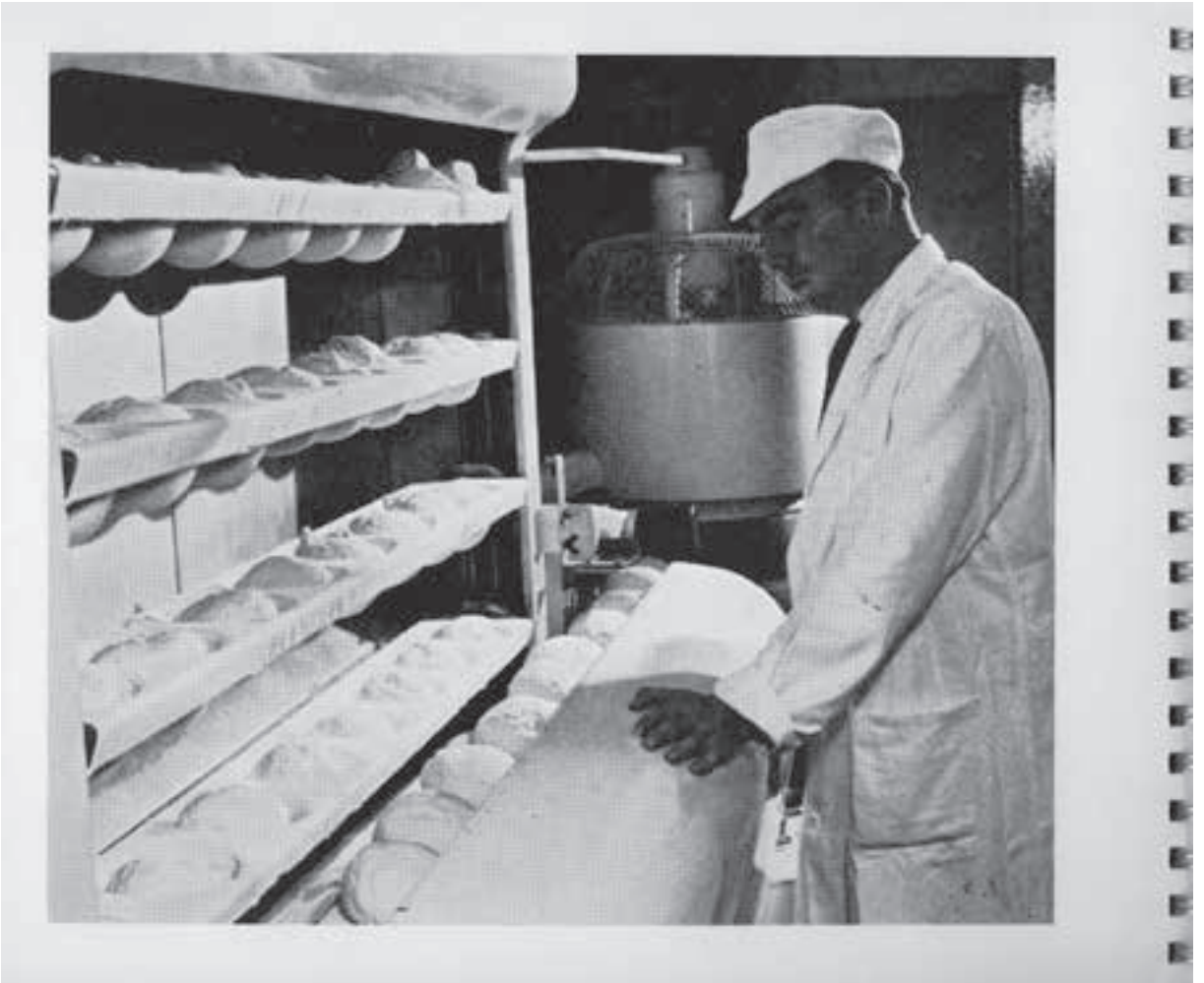
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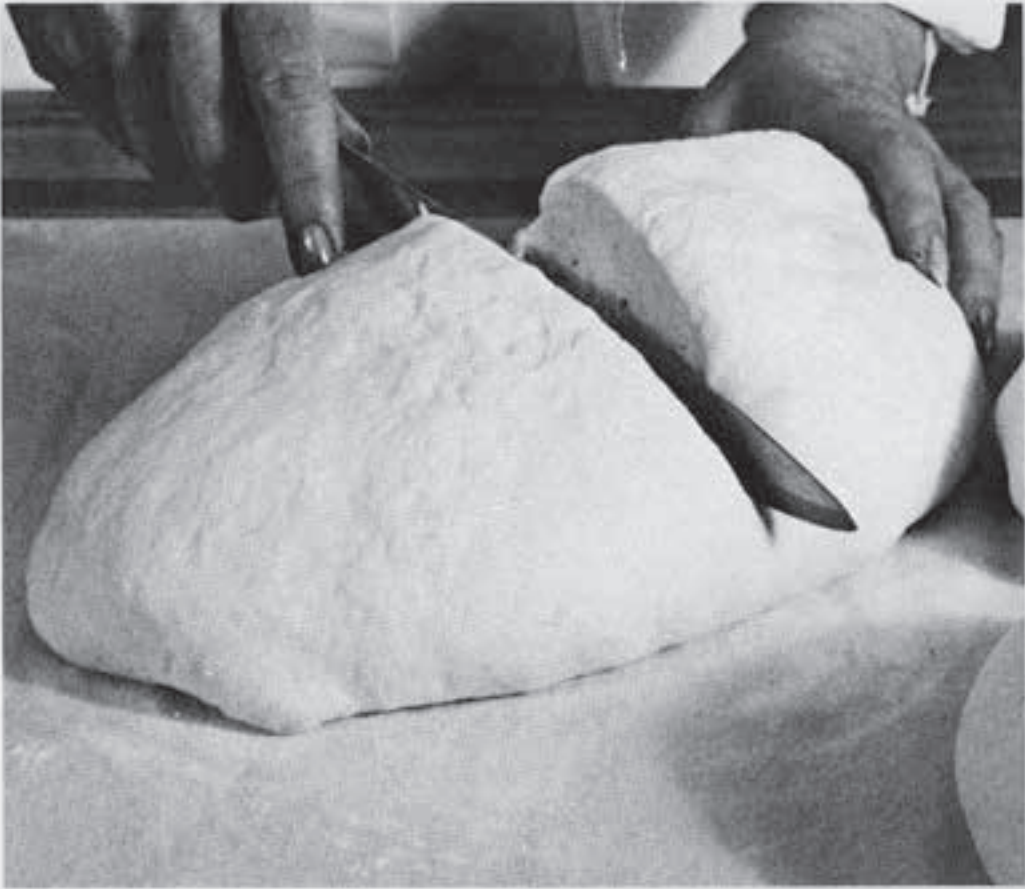


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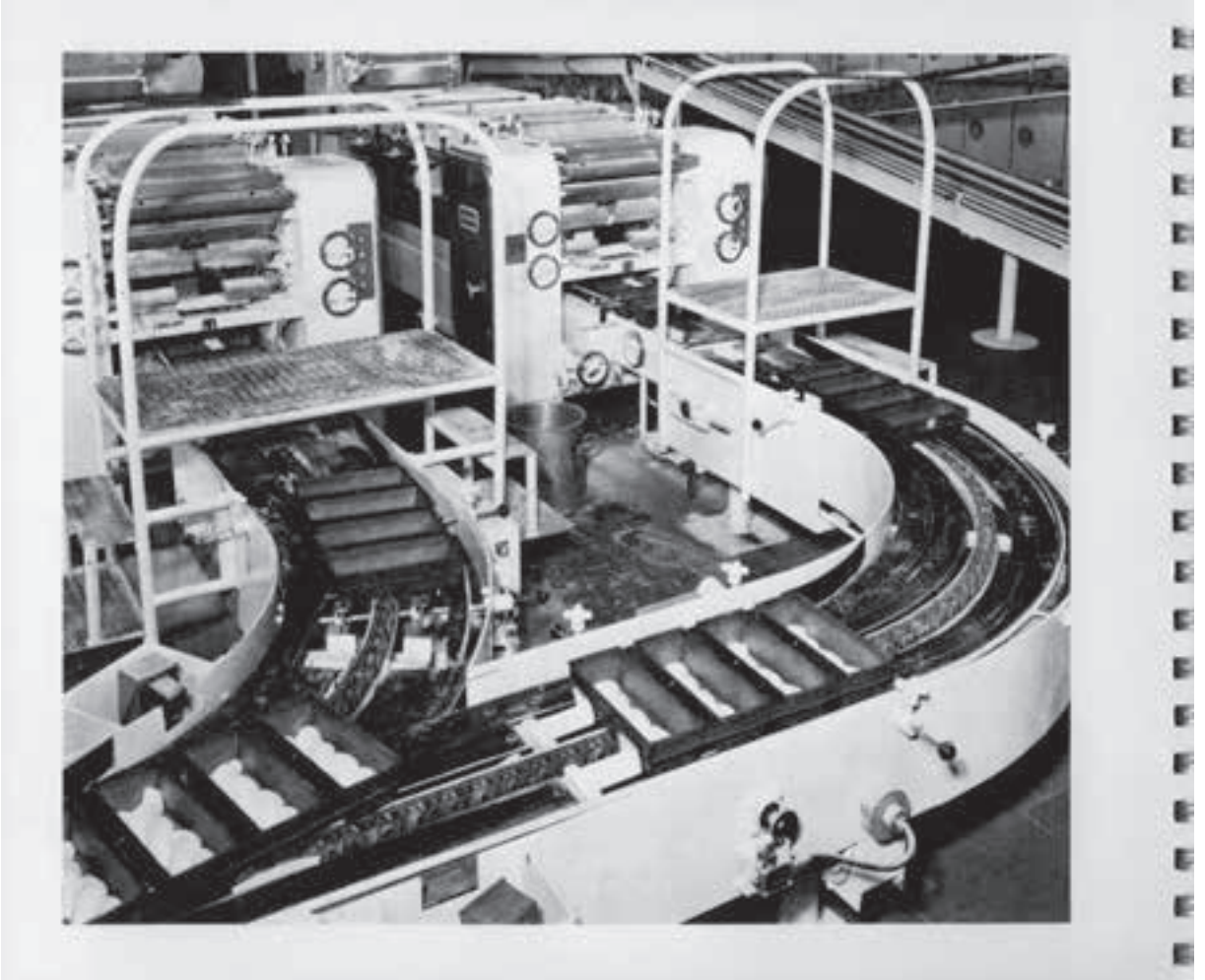
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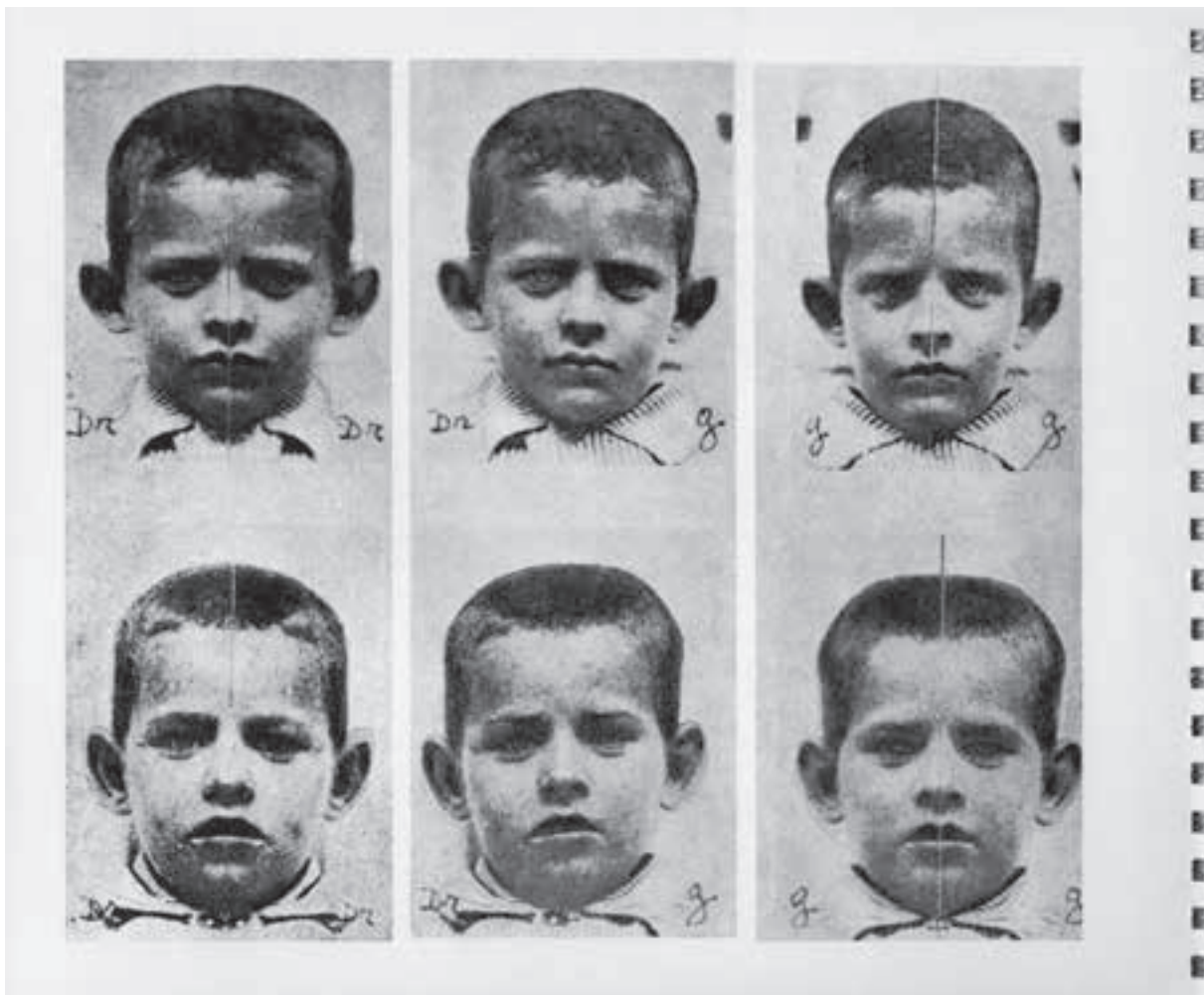
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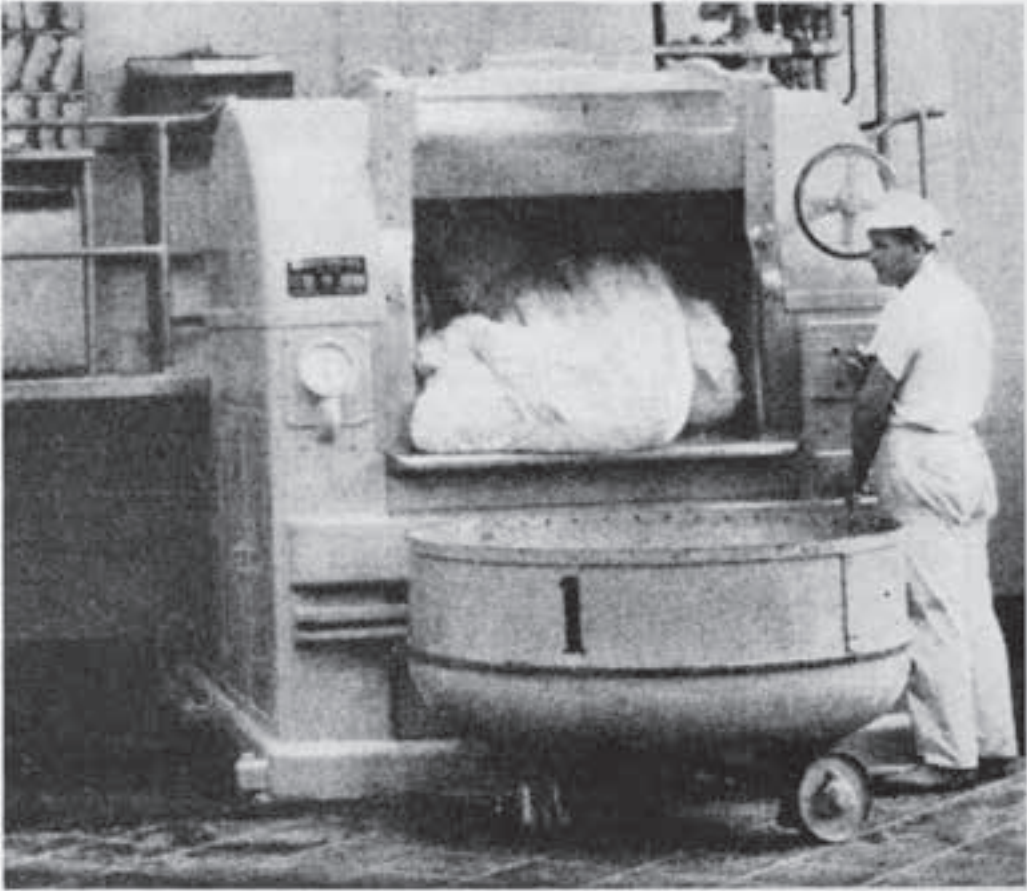




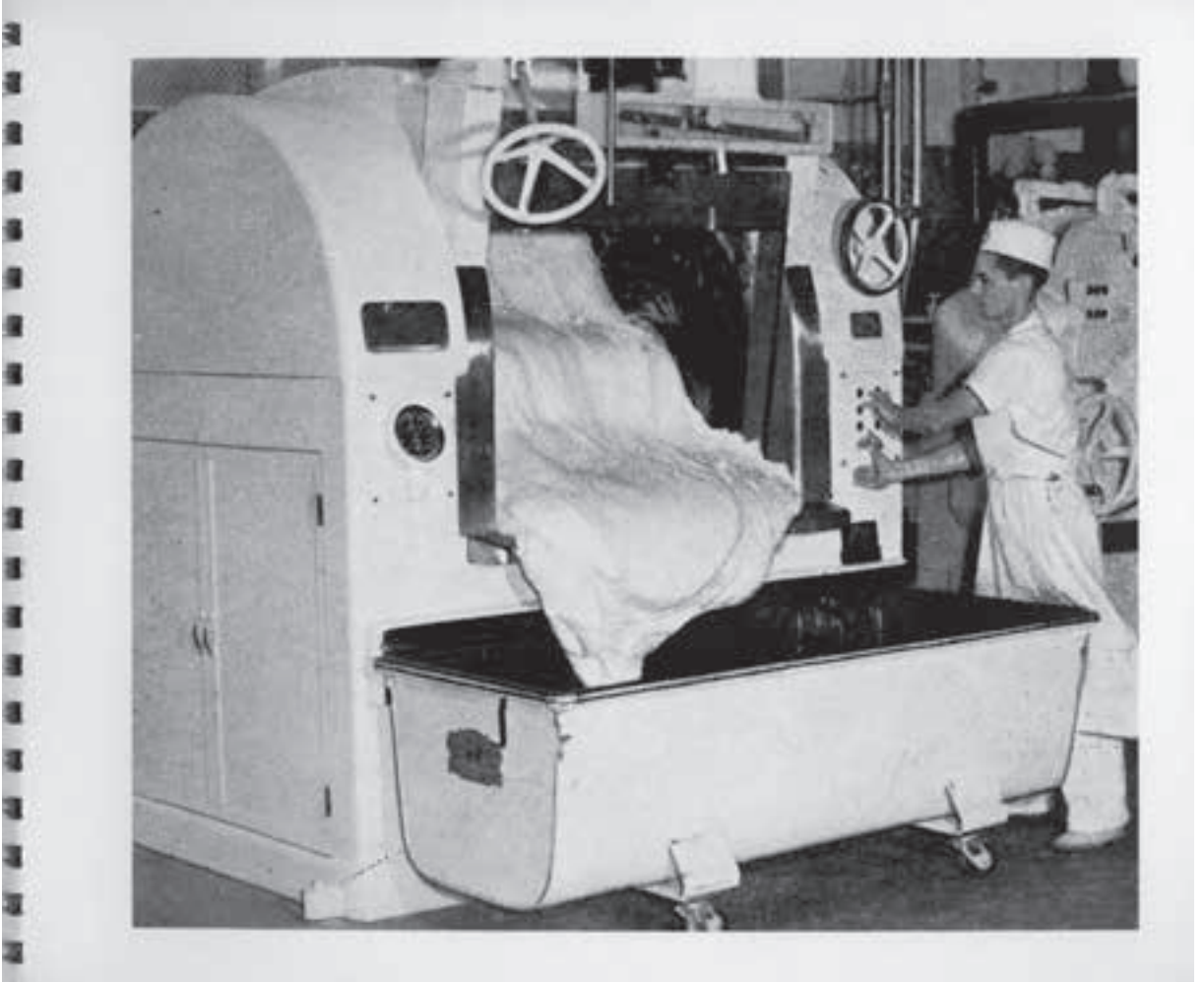


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Liz Magor
in Discussion
with
Ian Carr-Harris

Published in *C Magazine*, no. 11 (Summer 1986)

IAN CARR-HARRIS: Let's start with an obvious question, Liz. How do you see your position as an artist?

LIZ MAGOR: Good question. In fact, trick question—because sometimes I can hardly stand being an artist. Artists are so guilty, and they can be paralyzed or repressed by that guilt. Basically, I'm just trying to find a way to work in good faith—to get past the guilt. I would like to be able to work without being ashamed, but also without removing myself from the system by standing outside as a critic. A critic can too easily stand outside and analyze a situation without discussing their own complicity, or without implicating themselves; and I don't want to be in that position. I don't think it's an active position. It's an analytical position as opposed to a practicing position, and ultimately I think that it turns into a formal activity.

CARR-HARRIS: You're saying that the position of being a critic is "merely" formal?

MAGOR: I'm saying that all the mucky things that you're involved in when you're making work can't be considered when you're taking that sort of metacritical overview. I actually think artists are best prepared to work in a discursive manner rather than a metacritical one. For myself, I feel best prepared to work somewhere in between a purely sensible response and a critical one. Where it actually becomes an analysis of my own sensibility rather than an analysis of a large organism like a society. I don't see how I can assume I'm prepared to critique capitalism, or assume I'm prepared to critique things that I'm implicated in as though I were in the position of one outside them. I'm more prepared to analyze my own situation within that large organism, and working from that specific point of view maybe—through induction—maybe some general statements could be made.

CARR-HARRIS: I see. Criticism is merely formal to the degree that it is not self critical. I agree. It's difficult to know what people mean unless we know what their condition is.

MAGOR: I must say I seem to be becoming more interested in the word "esthetics" and less comfortable with the word "meaning." That makes me a little concerned that I may have given up certain

objectives. I would prefer to believe that I'm looking for another route. Maybe, as much as anything, I'm reacting to a very prescriptive or moralistic tone that I find in some criticism of artists. I'm referring to criticism of individual artists. In fact, Ian, I suppose I hold you responsible for this to some degree because you've written a great deal in the last few years. Very often I've agreed with your assessment of a general art approach towards a specific issue. I'm interested in the way you deal with the corruptions of that relationship. But I find it much harder to take when you talk about an individual artist. It's as though *they* embody those corruptions. I feel you're scapegoating them. Robert Bowers and Noel Harding, for instance. I don't see how you can re-order society by holding individual artists responsible for its ills. Don't you think this is what you've done in some of your writing?

CARR-HARRIS: Made artists into scapegoats? I suppose it depends somewhat on what we understand by the term. No, I wouldn't say I've held them responsible *for* society, in the oversimplification that scapegoating usually implies. And also, let's be clear that it is the work as it stands which is always at issue, not the artist. But I would say I've held them responsible *within* society. As I hold myself as well. The question of using prescriptive or moral terms is—I would agree—complicated. I would have to be honest, Liz, and say that I have some of the same doubts about their use. Over the larger part of my working practice as an artist I have tended to see the raising of questions as being the way in which moral issues should be addressed. But the constant asking of questions, whether literally or by implication, gets in itself to be boring. Both for me and for others. If you're going to ask questions, then you should also perhaps ask them a bit harder at certain points, not simply leave them open ended. I guess I saw the writing of criticism as being a way in which I could maybe make the questions harder than I found was permissible, say, two or three years ago. In both Robert's case and in Noel's case, I have liked some of their work. But in both cases, in addressing those works, I felt that they didn't really ask questions, or they didn't ask hard questions. To use your term, I felt they were, as a result, highly formalized. Also I suppose you could argue—let me try this—that if you don't address an issue on a specific level, it has the real danger of remaining simply an abstraction. I don't disagree with your criticism on a human level. In fact, I'm not at all sure I want to continue writing in the way that I have. But I don't see how you can really address complex concerns

if you don't address them on a specific level; and at some point or another it's going to be somewhat messy.

MAGOR: Except that what you do is to become part of a contradiction. That would be that the contemporary artist is told that they can't be the avant-garde; that they're constrained and contained within the codes of the system in which they find themselves; they can't transcend that. Then they're attacked for not being exemplary, for not being effectively progressive. If the charge is that they're not sufficiently progressive, or that they're in some way wallowing in nostalgia or whimsy or whatever, then I have to use the terms of the critic—which has something to do with asking “how effective is your practice?” And I would have to ask the same thing of the critique: “how effective is the critique in changing things?” I don't always like to measure things in terms of efficiency or that kind of effectiveness, because it presumes a solution, or it presumes a certain practice. In the kinds of things we're talking about, the only way—I think—that you can presume a *correct* solution is through a sort of tautology: that you say according to the logic of my experience, or according to my reasoning based on this, this would be the logical conclusion; and since you are part of this system that we're calling a problem, a system that is illogical or unreasonable, I don't see how you can from there come to project a logical, reasonable way to practice.

CARR-HARRIS: I think you've sketched out the specific nature of the condition of being critical. To remain tenable, I guess, it seems to me that we must bear in mind that a position is always specific, must be seeable as specific. Whether you are an artist, or a critic. So the conditions that obtain for both are questions of specific location and...

MAGOR: Except for this. If you're using a critique based on certain criteria, and you can't flex that to consider the criteria that the artist has assumed, then it seems to me that it's an inflexible—or authoritarian—critique that becomes a corrective rather than an analytical critique. The question turns back on you. If you say, for example, Noel Harding seems unwilling to communicate, or he is unable to communicate using these means, then I would have to ask for a measurement, like a poll or scale of effective communication, both for your work and for his work; because the claim is implicit

that your work communicates better, or that there is work that will communicate more clearly. At the same time, there is an assumption that to communicate clearly in artworks is a moral imperative. In your criticism of Robert Bowers, for example, you make a connection between existential transcendentalism and the Cold War. Since you had already connected Robert to transcendental existentialism, there is an implied connection of Robert to situations like the Cold War. I think this is unsupportable. I will agree that everything we do, as artists or otherwise, expresses a value system—and that these value systems are not relative, that they should be viewed critically. But I won't agree that everything is of the same ethical importance. Otherwise, I would be saying that to squish a bug is the same as to squish a baby or something, and I won't say that.

CARR-HARRIS: I doubt if I would either, Liz! But that doesn't mean that there may not be problems or issues connecting the squishing of bugs and babies.

MAGOR: I don't think artists are irresponsible if they say, "ethically speaking, on a hierarchical scale, my treatment of material through my art is less important than my treatment of people through my actions." You see, I worry about the confusion between taking a radical or overt stance in artwork, while neglecting to do so as a citizen. To stress various concerns or issues in one's work is not the same as taking care of these politically. It does show that you have concern; but it's a far thing from being active, or being an activist, in terms of effecting real change. I think of real change as being very material and concrete, not philosophical.

CARR-HARRIS: Material conditions, yes. But for myself, I don't separate out the consciousness or the reactions and the ideologies that are constructed out of material conditions to the degree that you seem to. I would see the situation as being more dialectical. The danger of ideology is that it can suffocate progression beyond the necessity of the material conditions themselves. So there is a purely ideological situation constructed, and the value of working philosophically, or of placing work in galleries or wherever to critique certain issues lies in the need to deal with that aspect of the dialectic. It's true that they aren't going to change material conditions as such; they aren't meant to. They mean to deal with ideology on its own ground. But I think

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this takes us back to something you said at the beginning, something about your own position in trying to find a middle ground between being “sensible” and being “critical.” Because I would see that, quite apart from possible disagreements over tactics, to be nevertheless an attempt to deal with ideology critically.

MAGOR: Perhaps. What I’m saying isn’t that I think work shouldn’t be critical, or that it shouldn’t operate that way. I’m talking about the *position* one takes critically, not about being critical in itself. Simply put, it’s whether to include myself as part of the subject of the critique. If I do that—it seems to me—I’m necessarily going to make subjective work that may be ambiguous or less clear in its point of view than work which critiques a structure which is taken to be outside myself. It gets a bit messy when you are both the critic and the critical subject.

CARR-HARRIS: Tell me about it! But how do you see what can take place? Because in this situation it would seem that there is an oppositional structure which has to be dealt with on another level; and part of that opposition would appear to be the difference between a formal concern and a concern of subject.

MAGOR: Well, I think—in the first place—that when you talk about these things, you’re talking as though we all pose these questions as philosophers would, which is to write them as a thesis or treatise. But the other thing that artists are doing is to organize material to form images that pose these questions. So the questions themselves are necessarily going to be different than philosophical questions because of this material form that they take. I’m not willing to banish formal concerns for concerns of issues or subjects; I would be denying myself a significant engagement with the material world. Sometimes it’s hard to remember that when you’re reading criticism in magazines. But remembering that the dialectic is between my mind and the material, certain things arise from this which are discursive; the discourse is between me and the things I do to material. Then there is the audience and what they do when they see this material. This material mediation wouldn’t happen if I just spoke to the people across the street, or wrote articles, or became a philosopher. Since a substantial part of our lives is concerned with material, outside of art I mean, it seems like a significant thing to deal with *within* art.

CARR-HARRIS: There seem to be significant differences between your work now and your work when you were on the West Coast, say five or six years ago. And I would see some of those differences as entailing the question of being critical. But in any case, would you see significant differences?

MAGOR: I found the concerns here to be completely different from BC, or Vancouver to be precise. It's hard for me to know if this is a regional or local thing, or if it just coincides with my own development; or if moving exposed me to different things. It's hard to say. But I could say that there is a concern here that you can see voiced in a number of forums through people's work or through people's writing—not just in Toronto, but in other places as well—that is assuming very strict corrective measure—to correct what we've inherited. Certain things are being stressed without consideration of the consequences. They're being stressed, I think, because—as I said—we're guilty; we're guilty of a bad history. At first you welcome this because you think “it's an alternative to something that I was not comfortable with”; and then the consequences begin to unfold; and the consequences are an adherence to or discussion of correct politics; which to me is the same thing as saying correct sexuality: it just doesn't exist.

CARR-HARRIS: The correction is worse than the error?

MAGOR: I think so. What if the consequence is a rejection of art altogether by young bright people? I'm thinking of students now; I know that many are dismayed by the narrowness of the path ahead of them. On the one side they are reluctant to address complex issues that would seem to require a different education than most art departments provide; and on the other side they are bored by the idea of simple material engagement. No student likes to think they aren't “progressive” or “advanced,” in spite of the fact that there is precious little in terms of what defines “advanced” contemporary art in the first place. I think it is completely inappropriate to respond to a student's queries about her sculpture by handing her a treatise by Hegel. All that does is teach her that authority is outside herself.

CARR-HARRIS: Since Hegel is almost impossible to read, I'd be interested in what kind of authority that would present! However, it seems to me that the problem of being “bored,” as you say, by

the idea of simple material engagement is important, and lies in an implicit understanding that the material conditions of the world are not in fact material at all. They're constructed out of our response to those conditions. When we are sensible of something in the world, it's not really the material we are sensible about, it's the historical placement, or historical production, surrounding that material that is at issue. So the question of critique enters effortlessly and logically from the very start. It enters at the moment one becomes sensible; and perhaps the problems raised by prescriptiveness—problems, as I say, that I agree exist—arise not from the fact that criticism doesn't exist from the start, but that criticism—to be criticism—must always be a *number of specific notions* about what is right, or what is justice, or what is appropriate; and any *contained* prescription about those notions is consequently inadequate. Criticism proceeds only out of the discourse of criticism, and not out of an agreement on criticism.

MAGOR: So what you're saying, Ian, is that an ideology isn't criticism.

CARR-HARRIS: Yes.

MAGOR: You see, here's the other problem I see that develops following from what you say. Criticism becomes tied to critical activity. If we're thinking of art functioning in some way as a critical activity, criticism is sort of art "squared"—art seems to be the practice, and criticism seems to be the theory; when in fact I think of art as the theory, and the world as the practice. You know, my life is the practice, my art is the theory of my life. If I have theory and criticism acting as the theory making my work the practice, I mistake my art for the real world. If I mistake art for the real world, I may think that I'm doing something about something when I'm not at all; and the whole activity becomes irrelevant. In spite of all the discussion of values, and the "don't do this" and the "do that," it becomes irrelevant because it's in a realm that's academic. It's academic because it's dependent on this closed theoretical system—it's an isolated system that has no interaction with the outside.

CARR-HARRIS: I would see academic, or closed, as perhaps an inevitable condition. I like what you are saying about art practice being in fact theory.

MAGOR: That's why I can say I think art should be critical, but I disagree with critical theory; or with it having such a "life."

CARR-HARRIS: Something I would agree with is that the whole edifice of intellectual discourse is academic. But it really doesn't exist in isolation from "life." The academic aspect of thinking lies not in that it's removed from life, but that it is only one aspect of life's functions. But I'm curious about how any of this would be changed—just thinking about this as a problem that might have some kind of solution—if the artist attempts to, let's say, place more emphasis upon their relationship to materials, or to material conditions. I'm not sure if you did say what that meant, Liz.

MAGOR: It does have something to do with material—I have this idea about what the value of that is. Let's see how this sounds: I think that the spectrum of possible relationships in the world has to be visible. There has to be representation and a presence of relationships—to things, to people—in order for us to know that we have choice; in order for us to know that alternatives are possible. So however discredited art is, or however debased and desperate it has become, I think that art reserves a place where a sort of unalienated labour can be imaged, or represented, in a world where there is a lot of alienated labour, and a lot of dichotomy. In this more modest role it may be a peg down from guiding the people to higher esthetic or moral realms, but it keeps a space open, a place where a less intentional activity can exist. I think that this kind of work has considerable value, and when I began looking at art as work instead of philosophy, it began to make a lot more sense. The way it might function made a lot more sense. The way I would do it made a lot more sense. The images I would use, or the images that I would seek analogies for made a lot more sense. Even the way I question what art was became a lot clearer. I stopped questioning it philosophically—not that I had ever really started! I thought less about what does it mean to *be*, and what does it mean to *know*, than I thought about what's different about making cars than making clay pots or paintings; which sounds very simplistic. But when you ask that question, certain things are implied, or there are certain implications.

CARR-HARRIS: That fall into the area of sensibility?

MAGOR: That fall into the area that I want to start calling esthetics. But calling it esthetics and thinking of esthetics as a larger thing than taste or sensibility; or thinking of sensibility as a larger word than a response to beauty or unity or harmony or any of those things. Calling esthetics the area where I have a significant interaction with the material world, or the sensate world. And I would like to use that word and have it include my psycho-social self, my complex self that would be in some way known to me through this interaction. So I say art functions in holding that place. It's just like keeping this door open so that it could be entered by any person at any time. I actually don't think it needs to have mass appeal, or have bigger galleries or museums or anything. I think it's sufficient to have a few rooms in a city where you can go and see it take place.

CARR-HARRIS: See it take place?

MAGOR: See this unalienated labour take place; or rather, that it can take place—that it has a place.

CARR-HARRIS: I certainly like the notion.

MAGOR: If it isn't naive.

CARR-HARRIS: No. No, actually I don't think it's naive—or at least I don't think you're being naive. I think you've put beautifully what probably all artists really want to do—maybe what all people at certain points want. If I understand you, it's a position of attempting to stand back—rather as if one were on the brow of a high hill—looking at one's entire existence in a moment of curiosity and acceptance, and attempting to delineate that experience, specifically, without falling into the problems that arise in specific encounters. However, this assumes the ability to do that, and assumes the luxury of being in the position to walk away from the angers that one has, and look at things differently. I have to wonder, though, whether it's really possible, at least as more than a desire.

MAGOR: I don't know whether I agree with the way you depicted this, as a sort of hill view, this panoramic view. I'll put it this way. Imagine a situation that obtains for both artists and people who aren't artists. Imagine that our relationship to our production is obscured by

our relationship to the products we purchase. The relationship that we see most images of—that's most visible—is our relationship to the material world as *consumers* of the material world. Our relationship as producers or transformers of that world is obscured or never imaged; so that we are...

CARR-HARRIS: Cheated?

MAGOR: Yes; and for a very particular purpose. There's a reason for wanting to cheat us of that; we have lots of Eaton Centres. So the kind of material engagement I'm talking about is an alternative to shopping, an alternative to the exaltation of material as a product to purchase.

CARR-HARRIS: I guess I had understood you to be talking about allowing oneself the enjoyment of, let us say, the "act" of making, or the "re-enactment" of that act.

MAGOR: It could be, but I'm not talking about pleasure only. I brought up pleasure because it seemed that artists, who do have this privileged position to have pleasure from material, often won't allow themselves to do that. For some reason we decided we don't deserve it; perhaps it's because we're ashamed of our history—the elitism attached to esthetic appreciation.

CARR-HARRIS: Yes, elitism; or at least luxury. But perhaps more than that, a certain irrelevance?

MAGOR: Yes, but I don't think you necessarily remove yourself from your anger or from the muck of banality or the complete ordinariness of your material existence. I'm not talking about making transcendental images or supercharged images. I'm actually talking about the very opposite: a place where the material world *isn't* charged with special significance; where it's almost a pre-commodity, where your production and your consumption are happening at the same time. When they are separated, it seems to me that we are then vulnerable to being attracted to objects that *have* been charged with significance, and perhaps not through our own means. So our only response is on a transcendental, an "auratic" level. We're always responding on a metaphysical level—to shoes, to Cuisinarts, to everything. I'm

interested in the part before that—almost the raw material, or the primary industry, the state where the stuff is first encountered. That’s why I think that critical prescription, in attempting to be “meaningful” and to be “communicative,” is inappropriate, or overstressed; because I’m not sure how communicable certain things are—or of the value of communicating at certain stages. Or whether in fact critical prescriptiveness really provides any alternative to the way most material in the world is offered to us—intentionally communicating its desirability.

CARR-HARRIS: The value of communicating at certain stages. Yes, I think you’re bringing up an important issue—that moral tone is not in itself sufficient; but that it has to seduce, or affect, the rest of us within some term, perhaps, of agreement.

MAGOR: I’m hoping that an artist might show material at a stage where anything might have happened—and then this happened. So that in the viewing of it one goes through this active process of seeing where material nearly wasn’t meaningful, and how it was processed into meaning; so that the production of meaning is apparent in the work.

CARR-HARRIS: You mentioned earlier that in attempting to understand the world, the “dialectic is between my mind and the material.” Is there a history to how this dialectic has proceeded in your own experience?

MAGOR: An important part of my conscious decisions when I’m working is based on a memory of myself when I was young—a teenager—maybe about sixteen or seventeen, in Vancouver. I was wanting, I was *looking* for a significant engagement with the materiality of the world—assuming that it was possible. I can’t remember why I assumed that, but I felt that there must be something besides “what I’ve got now.” I looked very hard for this role, or this place to be, where I might have a fairly intense and constant engagement with this materiality. I looked in a variety of places, including the art school where I took a summer course. Remarkably, I didn’t find this “place to be” there, in spite of my looking right at where it was supposed to be housed. Eventually I found the engagement I wanted through a very roundabout means, and I found it in visual art. But my memory of how invisible art had been to me became a very strong motivation

to make my art a certain way, and not to make it the way that it had been presented to me—or not present to me—when I was looking. One of the things I recognize is that the reason I couldn't see it was that the art I saw wasn't truly concerned with the material world; it was in effect engaged with the transcendental or immaterial world.

CARR-HARRIS: I had the same experience at art school. It's probably what art schools do best! How did you figure out what the problem was?

MAGOR: I can think of two things that helped me. One was seeing Claes Oldenburg's work in New York, where very ordinary objects were presented in an altered context, or in an altered form, so that their *ordinariness* wasn't lost, but their extra-ordinariness was implied or suggested. And the other thing that helped me come to certain conclusions was then returning to BC and seeing a physical world that was significant to me, again, an *ordinariness* that I had overlooked before. Specifically, these were coastal images, images of *primary industry* on the West Coast—like fishing and logging. And I think why I was able to see these as significant visual images was that it was primary industry. So the material was apparent, the processing of material was very close to the source of material; and there was a close relationship between the transformation of material and the existing original material.

CARR-HARRIS: And this, I guess, is clear in your piece *Production*—particularly, for me anyway, as you installed and changed it at “Aurora Borealis” last year in Montreal.

MAGOR: Yes. This basic transformation of material, and all the evidence of that transformation, became significant to me—as an analogy, perhaps—for the production of something meaningful, or of something “from this state to this state.” It wasn't only in industry; there also were images of coastal situations, rural situations, conditions you'd find in any rural place where people are resourceful and they make do with materials at hand. Situations in which the original identity of the material is still apparent after it's gone through a very rudimentary transformation to be used in some other way. And I saw lots of homesteads, coastal homesteads, where people had transformed the material into useful or less useful things. Sometimes their

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use was obscured by time. Where they had been useful early in the century—a pier, for example, that had been unused for a few decades and was knocked around and was no longer a pier, it was somewhat abstracted; its use was known to me, but its present form was altered. So I began to think of art as analogous to industry; not just industry in the sense of gross national product, but also a more domestic industry, or anything I would call industry—work that transforms material. This gave me the world of images to choose from, and a way to proceed. It also gave me an identity of myself as working in a particular way, which has been invaluable at times when I have more doubt than I need.

CARR-HARRIS: “More doubt than I need.” That’s great, Liz! I like that. I know I’ve always worked as physically as possible *because* it was physical, and it allows me to spread the doubt over a considerable period of time. I also like hearing you refer to images—such as old logging mills—which have been usually robbed of their power by what we could call a sentimental—and urban—nostalgia. What about that nostalgia? Or what about urban production? Is it more false? Can we talk about *Regal Decor* at this point?

MAGOR: Well, let’s say I’m looking at two images—one being an image of the West Coast, a very small logging operation on the Coast; and the other being an image from *House & Garden* magazine: a living room, say, in somebody’s house in Italy or Manhattan, or who knows where. I find there is a basic difference between these two images. One shows not only the way the picture was produced, but it is a picture of production. It’s a picture of a logging operation. All the signs of what kind of operation, the size of operation, the period—the historical period—when that kind of hand logging was done; the number of people involved in the operation, the location; all this is there. All those things are very specific and *production based on these specifics constructs the image*. In the image from *House & Garden*, the only thing that unites the objects is the taste or will of the decorator. It’s an eclectic assortment, a kind of tentative association that erases all traces of the production of the image. And the photography is made to seem effortless, just as the decoration of the apartment is made to seem effortless; or the earning of the money to buy the things is made to seem effortless. My response can only be one of sensibility or taste. I would prefer, then, to make an image more like the logging operation.

CARR-HARRIS: Because, of course, it is exactly this *House & Garden* condition that, as you say, engenders that sense of guilt so many artists bear?

MAGOR: Yes, I find myself completely entranced by the images of this beautiful apartment, and oblivious to the fact that so much is obscured; until I finish the magazine and realize I've been seduced by six or seven different apartments. I begin to sense that esthetics have been used to manipulate me and to create specialness. At the end of one issue—which is only one out of twelve a year—I am nauseated by how prevalent expressions of sensibility are, and how easy it is to create a sense of specialness and uniqueness through the manipulation of esthetics. And this makes me suspicious of my *own* sensibility, the expression of my sensibility; and maybe as an over-reaction I begin to look for another use of my skills.

CARR-HARRIS: But this is not a unique experience. You are explaining why so many artists—including yourself—have decided to be critical. That nausea has been channelled into a determination to make art socially critical.

MAGOR: Of course, and it is an appropriate response. But my concern is that we don't, at the same time, forfeit a whole engagement with the sensible world, the materiality of the world, to those who can afford it; those that can actually financially afford it, by rejecting esthetics simply because it has been misused.

CARR-HARRIS: So in opposing against this image from *House & Garden* the straightforward image of the production of hand logging, for instance, you are hoping here not only to be critical, but also to find some way of recouping this condition you are being cheated of?

MAGOR: Yes. If we put ourselves in a position where we're ashamed of our desire for that engagement, and forego it and leave it to others, then esthetics becomes a commodity with no visible alternative. We're left with shopping. Art could be a place to represent an inversion; in other words, the desirable position is not that of being able to acquire goods and materials, but that of being able to produce. To identify ourselves as producers.

CARR-HARRIS: I agree that production is probably better than acquisition, though the two terms could use some defining. But just as you pointed out earlier that criticism can exist without art, surely production—in the open sense—also can exist without art; even if art may not be able to exist without production?

MAGOR: I suppose I'm assuming that there is some innate need for *esthetic response* and expression, and to give it up is a sacrifice. At this point I question whether the self-righteousness that comes with the sacrifice we make as "guilty" is not our payment for being unsupported by the public; and whether we don't give ourselves this payment in the form of a new myth to occupy: that as artists we are superior in some way, and that we will lead others to the "good place" to be. Perhaps this is our compensation for being ignored and not supported by anyone other than the government. I question that. I think—if we are really critical—we would criticize that when we see it; and I'm wondering whether we can avoid this new myth without becoming producers of "stuff" for the pleasure of others; without becoming a service industry. I'm wondering whether a way past this might be found in an area where our production becomes part of the image—the production of our work becomes part of the image of the work; so that self-reflexiveness—self-criticalness—is within the work. Rather than the work being about somebody else's relationship, it becomes about our own relationship as makers of this stuff.

CARR-HARRIS: Doesn't this tend to lead us back into philosophy? That level of self-criticism would sound covert to me.

MAGOR: I guess I'm counting on a certain resistance in the material to being turned into idea, always into Idea. So that the material has an assertion of its own that resists our manipulation of it through a mental activity.

CARR-HARRIS: How does that differ, say, from a high modernist position?

MAGOR: I don't know. What's the high modernist position?

CARR-HARRIS: Well, that the identity of a particular activity, and also therefore its value, lies simply in that identity, and in the act of making that identity more understood.

MAGOR: You mean “art for art’s sake”?

CARR-HARRIS: That’s what it’s been reduced to. That’s, I think, what you described as the invisibility of art.

MAGOR: The difference would be that the reflexiveness lies in its relationship to the outside world, not to the part-to-part relationships within the work.

CARR-HARRIS: Certainly materiality changes ideas from a state of conception to state of reception. And I won’t argue against the innateness of a need for esthetic response and expression. I guess I see that innate need as one stemming from our need to claim attention; or if you like, to claim dignity and authority. I think we both agree that this has to be seen as an act of social responsibility rather than of private indulgence. This can, however, produce some odd misalliances and ironies. There is that irony, of course, of artists being seen by the public as welcome facilitators of transcendentalism, while ourselves in fact view it with deep suspicion.

MAGOR: No doubt there has always been disparity between how the public identifies artists, and how artists do. And that disparity, I think, between how we’re viewed, and how we view ourselves, contributes to making our work invisible. Since we produce one kind of thing, and everybody is looking for something else, it falls—it keeps falling between the cracks. Unfortunately, this state of grace that is thought to be the place of artists; this non-political place that is beyond the muck; it doesn’t exist. In fact, as I said, contemporary artists find themselves wholly implicated in the muck in the most extreme way; almost to the point of paralysis. There is an anxious choice we have to make between being leaders of a society, and being reflectors of a society. Neither one of these, I think, we can accept comfortably. On the one hand we admit we are constructed within a society, while on the other—well, being a witness feels so passive. The further irony of our situation, as I see it, is that we are regarded as irresponsible or amoral—the Bohemian care-less person; when in fact

we're *consumed* by our morality, we're obsessed by our responsibility; at least, a great number of us are. Perhaps we all are. It would be nice to think that even Julian Schnabel thinks about it. Perhaps he has decided to proceed anyhow, in spite of the bad press!

CARR-HARRIS: And you admire him?

MAGOR: No. But I don't think he's as guilty as Benjamin Buchloh thinks he is. I think he's an average guy who is just getting on with life; like people in other occupations. If there's a moral imperative to be active, politically active, it doesn't follow that we look to a person's art for verification of that involvement. It *may* be there, but I wouldn't say it is mandatory that it be there. I think artists today are operating under very contradictory conditions, and I think there are very few places to operate. I don't actually see why artists are on the one hand supposed to be normal people—that's what we're told: we're not geniuses anymore; we're just, you know, guys and girls; but on the other hand are held to be exemplary people who don't need approval, don't need support, don't need to be part of society, don't need to be recognized, don't need to be seen; that we can exist with this kind of isolation, having no social function whatsoever! It's crazy!

CARR-HARRIS: Yes. I can't think of a better word for it. Possibly we are even being increasingly invested, as artists, with the contradictory desires and fears that "ordinary" people feel about professionals of all kinds—about a society that is more and more professionalized and therefore literally incoherent. So our isolation—as artists—is a function of everyone's experience of that isolation. And so identity itself starts to fragment. In fact, you've looked at identity in a lot of your work. In your book piece, for instance, *Four Notable Bakers*, you take us through this question of contradictory pressures, don't you?

MAGOR: It's a sort of book of fears; a book of fears of reproduction, or fears of difference and fears of sameness. They are images of contradiction, social contradiction—of putting a high value on individuality while offering a very narrow range within which we can express our difference. In the book I use bread dough as a material that is valued for its ability to be consistently reproduced; while the people in the book are multiplied less successfully. They seem diminished by the comparison to images of mass production; they seem devalued by the

attempts to treat them as material. Pushing against this humanism are images of twins who make the notion of uniqueness seem vain.

CARR-HARRIS: And you come back to this matter of twins in another work—the fish piece.

MAGOR: The fish piece is a look at how legitimate these fears may be. In the context of this society, I don't actually think these are illegitimate fears. The fear of being distinct for the wrong reasons is legitimate, and so in that piece I use a situation that's very banal, the situation of identifying, choosing, a fish at the market; and I sort of jam that into, or marry it, to something more important—which is the identification of a person for purposes that remain to be seen. The text that goes with the fish piece describes two women.

There are about five pieces of text, just short simple text. In four of the pieces the two women—their sameness—is described: that they wore the same dresses, that they had the same fears, that they had the same disabilities, that they were proud of the same things, and so on. Then, in the middle, it begins: “*The most notable difference is that Madelaine seems more affected in manner than Kathleen, she wears her hair in a fringe, and has long red fingernails.*” It goes on to describe three or four very trivial features distinguishing one woman from her sister. In her efforts to distinguish herself, I recognize in Madelaine a motivation similar to that of an artist—who is attempting to make a distinguishing statement, or a distinguished image. I recognize in that piece of text both the motivation to do it and the inability to really be original in that sense. I follow that with a picture at the bottom left-hand corner of a man who has been salmon fishing and has caught a big salmon. He is standing, the camera is a bit below his waist, so it's making him look tall. He is standing in the water with his hip waders on, and he has two Canadian flags—one on his breast pocket and one on his hat, and he's got a pink rosy face. I chose him because of his Canadian flags, and also because the pinkness of his cheeks was the same colour as the pinkness of the rubber fish; and he's holding this beautiful salmon which has distinguished itself from the others. In his difference from the school, the fish has delivered himself into a predicament.

CARR-HARRIS: I think it's a beautiful work, and I guess I liked a lot the deftness of that particular edge of black humour the postcard inserts! But let's see now. The predicament we're discussing is that by "making a wrong move," like the salmon, let's say, we get caught in contradiction; or even worse, in social annihilation. And you have suggested that those contradictions are imposed ironically both by the misunderstandings of non-artists, and by the all-too-clear appreciation of those misunderstandings by artists themselves—who then overcompensate for their "guilt." Have you ever done a work which addresses the specific condition of restraint imposed by other artists?

MAGOR: There is a small piece. It's based on the Brâncuși *Sleeping Muse*—which is an image I like a lot; but I also have some discomfort with it. I was wondering whether my discomfort was because this person, or this image, had been stylized to a degree that an identity had been abstracted, or a specific had been made general. So I thought: what if I took this back to a specific identity? Who might that be? A model? It might be a woman who is the model; who might she be? She might have been an artist. She might have only been able to be a model, and she might have been an artist who was sleeping, not working dreaming of a Brâncuși—dreaming of a Brâncuși sculpture. On the side of the copy of the Brâncuși plaster head I made, it says: *The Sleeping Artist, 1924*, which was the date that the *Sleeping Muse* was produced. The muse becomes a person, but the person can only *dream* of working. So there are two responses to this constraint. One is to copy, as I copied the Brâncuși sculpture, to do over and over again what's already been valued; the other is to do nothing: to sleep, to dream of working. In a way, they are the same. One is hibernation, and the other is anorexia, and I see the appeal of both of those things. I see them as a way to relax, a way not to be anxious anymore; but I also see how destructive that would be. So I did the little Brâncuși head. Then I thought I'd like to do a work that was more specific in referring to the pressure on both sides that I was feeling. I also wanted the sleeping artist to wake up. If some fifty years later the artist were to wake up, would she find herself as constrained as in 1924? Socially, morally, economically? Reflecting on the fact that at this time I'm constrained both by the expectations of the public as well as by my own, my image would have to be something that could include the production *and* the reception of art.

CARR-HARRIS: That's interesting, Liz. Because when I think of your sleeping artist, think also of the woman in *Regal Decor*. What does she wake up to?

MAGOR: That's my question too. If one were to wake up now, to the conditions of art or object-making now, what is one waking up to?

In *Regal Decor* I wanted a factory—where things are made; and I wanted a home—where things are cherished. In a way, I matched them—these two things I wanted—to the two images I talked about earlier: the logging site and the *House & Garden* magazine. In fact, the home is still in the magazine—in the work. I mean; the logging site has turned into a linoleum plant. Linoleum of course has a visual dependence on ceramic tile. It presents a vinyl image of ceramic tile; and our memory of tile carries us into the acceptance of the falseness of the linoleum, and makes it seem perfectly satisfactory.

CARR-HARRIS: Legitimizes it.

MAGOR: Yes. Also I simply liked it as a form, because this flooring that normally you think of as a horizontal plane is stored in tall vertical rolls. Formally there is a contradiction. So I was thinking of this linoleum as the production of sort of a synthetic art, the production of the material world for pleasures that are based on memory and nostalgia.

CARR-HARRIS: It's a kind of dreaming of pleasure.

MAGOR: Yes—it's made possible through a kind of forgetfulness; through, I guess, the forgetting that the original ever existed.

CARR-HARRIS: The work divides neatly into two kinds of illusionary production, then. What about the "home"?

MAGOR: In the second part of the work I used a domestic image. I bypassed the store, which is to me just a transition phase to the home. Home is where we really celebrate our belongings. When we take the thing "*home*," we can really forget that it was mass produced. It's harder to forget that in a store. Also, the home interests me because it's the place where you may have your most intense material involvement. It's where your relationships with people take place—in and

among all this stuff. I started in a vague way thinking of that: thinking of relationships existing in the midst of domestic objects; and the intimacy and intensity—or lack of intensity—in some way having something to do with the environment that contains the thing. It seems sometimes that the material world asserts itself on the interpersonal world, as though it is part of the human relationship. And so I decided to take one item, one object of the domestic situation, and give it a character—which is a standard art thing to do. I chose a fireplace because it worked so well. On so many levels it worked well.

CARR-HARRIS: What do you mean, exactly, Liz, when you say “many levels”? Are you speaking of ambiguities, or ambivalence? Or contradictions?

MAGOR: There is a contradiction right within the work: that it is done with sort of an exuberance, both materially and in terms of scale, and seems never-ending. It kind of goes from the beginning of the gallery to the end. In every material way it seems not to limit itself; but at the same time it’s wholly about limitation and wholly about—at least its subject matter is wholly about—the anxiety of constraints, of suppression. It presents an image of a person squeezed between the factory and the home. Her image in the magazine comes at a kind of junction; and the choice of that image comes from the same degree of contradictory motivation as everything else in the piece. I think of her as a very sincere image of anxiety or anguish, or something that seems a very intense response; and yet I’ve put her in a situation that’s very glib and cynical—in a frame over a fireplace. So they struggle with each other. The sincerity or authenticity of the image struggles with a context which is very insincere; and I don’t resolve that.

CARR-HARRIS: I like that. I think artworks have to acknowledge contradiction and ambivalence. Ambiguity, it seems to me, is another matter. Since ambiguity is a given condition of communication of language that is, I am concerned about the problem of gilding the lily. Let me ask a question that arises, I think, from the problem—common to almost all artworks—of interpretation. You talk about the image of the woman as being “sincere.” This would seem a “clue,” let us say, to an understanding of the work’s play in contradictions. If the small space that an artwork can find for itself—between a kind of simplistic

sensibility on the one hand, and an overly anxious desire to be critical on the other—depends on clues and an ability to track through clues, is there not a certain gamesmanship involved? Is that not to make artworks into a game of detection, and to make fairly specific—and even unfair, or unreasonable—intellectual and cultural assumptions about the position of the viewer?

MAGOR: Perhaps. But something that I've always thought was curious was that, while dealing with objects in the normal world people will operate on a metonymic level, when they enter the art gallery they immediately jump into a metaphoric mode. It's training, I suppose, but they expect works to "work" on a metaphoric level; and when they don't, they don't see anything. And so, five or six years ago, I made quite a few works that were very literal on purpose; to see how invisible they could go. In fact, this work with the waves—*18 Books*—was meant to be about looking for something else and not seeing what was being offered to you; it was about missed signals—literally. But now, accepting how complex the conditions for reception are, I'm not so interested in playing games with the audience—because I really am more interested in making an image of something that's important to me. So I hedge my bets.

CARR-HARRIS: Accepting, in other words, this metaphoric reception.

MAGOR: Yes, though I still find metaphor to be unreliable on its own. I depend on the context to control it. I mean that I provide the context in which the metaphor exists, hoping that I can find images and materials and conjunctions that are able to operate on a number of levels. In choosing the fireplace, for example, it physically has a hole and a funnel shape. So given no experience with fireplaces, given no metaphoric expectation, the form itself has a shape that is significant to me—which is a sucking in and a funnelling down, or a narrowing down. Then it might operate also on a metaphoric level as the "hearth" of the home, or something.

CARR-HARRIS: I understand; but I'm not sure that metaphor can be avoided by an appealing to a primary level of form. I suspect most people are too sophisticated, as it were, to allow themselves to penetrate to that level. Children—young children—perhaps.

MAGOR: True, but I'm not trying to avoid it, I'm trying to aid it with form. I hope they act in consort. Another example could be the choice of how to express the anxiety of the person in the photograph—what kind of situation—to put that person in. It's both an image from personal experience—of finding that five o'clock in the morning is the most anxious period of the day, where you physically feel the anxiety as you kind of roll out of sleep into an awakened anxiety and also it's an image of hibernation, an image representing a theoretical position or strategy. And I've found that it was this second imaging which people connected to.

CARR-HARRIS: Because in operating as clues, they beg ambiguity; and don't necessarily signal our intention?

MAGOR: Well, I have no idea whether people are going to respond to the evidence of the code, or the evidence of the fact, or the evidence of their projections. But what I can say is that this work is ambivalent; it is contradictory. My position is ambivalent, but it's still a position I'm occupying over here. I'm not all over the map! Within a certain area of investigation, let us say, I have doubt. My question is "how to proceed critically, without being authoritarian"; it isn't "what is of value?"; I think engaged work is of value. So I'm very energetically making this very critical piece which to me is the significant difference from me in a very *miserly* way making a critical "statement." I'm investing everything I've got—I don't want to sound hyperbolic; but I'm investing a good deal in making this critical statement which almost negates the critical statement. Let's say, I'm very, very enthusiastically making art in a statement that very, very critically condemns art. But I also want to say that I'm aware of the danger of affirming the conventions I despise by engaging the conventions of art as my means of speaking. I know this is problematic. But considering the alternatives—I guess I'll take my chances with convention. In each work, of course, I hope to find a way to undermine the conventions; in *Regal Decor* I take the scale, the range of material, and what I would say is its obvious subjectivity as constituting some kind of significant assertion of value. I think of the piece as asserting the value of making art—for various reasons; one of which is its ability to function critically. But I don't see why anyone would listen to a critic who is so uptight as to not allow themselves to criticize with gusto. Do you know what I mean?

CARR-HARRIS: Of course! Any more than pay attention to artworks that are too timid to address us—how did you call it—“exuberantly.” I couldn’t agree more. I guess that my intention, in presenting certain demands, let’s say, in the writing I have done was precisely to “criticize with gusto.” I certainly attempt to approach my own work in this way. I guess making art is different, and for me, anyway, a bit more real. More real, perhaps, than even a conversation like this. I wonder—would you say, Liz—that in the making of artworks, because things are slowed down, artists have a chance to think more fully about the range of interconnections taking place in a given situation; more fully than, say, in talking like this, or in viewing artworks?

MAGOR: I guess I go back to myself at sixteen, when conversation had no meaning. I couldn’t understand it. I needed something so slow that I could just—take my time. Reading was good, but looking was better. Do you remember that—almost everything being incomprehensible? Things were so fast.

CARR-HARRIS: Yeah—I used to read the comics over five times!

MAGOR: So I think of that as still being necessary at different times in my life. To slow down. I guess I feel more comfortable carrying on a conversation through material in a certain way since it has the slowness; it’s so slow to produce that I have more time to consider my options. In terms of material, I do think about things besides art objects: things, places, hunks of land or various objects—they made me want to make art in the first place. The first time I saw a shingle factory I wanted to make that shingle factory. In a way, art to me is a formalized attempt to consume the world by remaking it. That’s why I think its value lies in maintaining the presence of that kind of activity—where you produce and consume at the same time. It’s in the remaking that I invest all kinds of leftover feelings that I can find no other outlet for, or no other way to satisfy. I’m sure that takes place all the time in the imagination, but art to me is a public place to do that. A place where I can *exhibit* the process of making and remaking.



Pulp Fiction Presents the Special Collection

Published in *Toronto: A Play of History (Jeu d'histoire)*, the catalogue for the inaugural exhibition at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, May 1–June 17, 1987. *Pulp Fiction Presents the Special Collection* was an extensive installation in which sculpture students at the Ontario College of Art (now OCAD University) reproduced artifacts found in the collection of the Royal Ontario Museum

Since 1981 when I began teaching at OCA [Ontario College of Art], I have perceived the student body to be a medium, similar to a spiritual medium, capable of summoning intelligence from the other side. The spirits called forth may be revealed in cryptic ways, yet there are undeniably more souls gathered together in the classroom than the twenty-odd found on the class list.

As a newcomer to Toronto I depended on this quality for initial contact with my colleagues at the college. The paths of part-time teachers may seldom cross, but students will talk in their teacher's tongue. Some students are unaware of their debts. Others develop anxieties about the resemblance. They vow to turn off the Ian Carr-Harris soundtracks, erase the John Scott smudges, and vulgarize the Eldon Garnet urbanity. It appears that students believe their work is an inappropriate place to express admiration for a teacher who has shown them something. For my part, I'm not alarmed to see it there. I expect it will pass; and with the student mixed into it, it feels like a conversation. I have learned about many artists through my students, and in lonely 1981 I looked forward to the Wednesday séance.

While it is not surprising to find the concerns of instructors represented in the work of students, it is slightly weird to sense a mentor of a greater distance. A teacher's teacher; De Kooning's teacher; Cézanne's teacher; Robert Bateman's teacher—they're all there. An infinite variety of styles and philosophies can be harboured by a class of twenty people. When a student unwittingly plays host to the past, becoming, for example, an embodiment of a Parisian bohemian, the hegemony of the current art world and its concerns is broken, and one senses the presence of the general public.

To address an art student is to address two identities in rapid alternation, a non-artist and an artist. A class is both a lay group and a group of initiates. It is heterogeneous yet single-minded. Students mimic the past and promise the future.

In theory, the teacher's role is to stabilize the identity by unburdening the student of myths and misconceptions, while drawing out expressions of personal and public relevance. Certainly this happens sometimes. But students have an amazing capacity to resist being taught, and by doing so the student body retains its power as a medium, a

connection between irreconcilable realms. The class communicates the non-art world to the artist/instructor like a clairvoyant evoking visions. The suburbs of Toronto, the small towns of Ontario, all tumble into the classroom virtually intact. Art students are people who have raised children, worked in mills, emigrated from other countries. Some have university degrees, some have never written an essay. In an ironic reversal, as a representative of the art world I feel like the voice of a static, homogeneous culture battered by a vital horde. Art talk goes in, and comes back bent, stretched, changed. Still, as noisy as it gets, the classroom discussion has a function. It erects a stanchion, a prop against art's chronic lean towards narcissism and isolation. For a few moments every Wednesday I valorize the students as messengers, delegates sent from the larger world to keep things straight.

If the students can save one, fetch one from the academy, perhaps too they can retrieve objects from the institute. As artists are found distinct from the general public, so are artifacts separated from everyday objects. In a collaborative endeavour called "Pulp Fiction Presents the Special Collection" a group of students has laid hands on a roomful of objects at the Royal Ontario Museum, pulling them out of the glass cases onto their worktables. They have to some degree revived these things by offering themselves as the medium through which the objects can be removed from the museum. It is only a cardboard life, but even the poverty of cardboard cannot silence communication between the original and its remake. Traces of working, of intention, are remembered through the form and we have a whiff of the object before its historical and material value will accrue. Of course, identity and resemblance being what they are, it is only moments before our own efforts are galvanized by history and value. But those moments are worthwhile. They give us a chance to add our voice to the accumulation of meaning.

Perhaps, within the context of this exhibition I am using the students as my cross and clove of garlic to protect myself from the exhibition's historicising premise. If so, I thank them for their protection and hope they receive something in return. But beyond that, I hope their work suggests another way for art to be received. I think of a classroom discussion in which we agree to concentrate on a particular issue. Attending to the topic as one body we can experiment with our thoughts knowing that the outcome cannot be claimed or borne by

any one individual. Perhaps in this way it is easier to be vulnerable to failure. In this way too, perhaps we can function as ordinary people of a living culture, not extraordinary people of potential museum status. Students, happily or not, seem constantly vulnerable to failure. From one point of view, this can be seen as an achievement, and from the strength of their non-professional status students remind me that the ideal of the museum need not be the model for all cultural activity.

On Mercer Union, Installation, Palaces, and Shelter

Published to accompany *nO fiXeD aDdrESs* by Joey Morgan
and *The Palace of the Queen* by Corrine Corry curated by Magor
at Mercer Union, Toronto, May 12–June 6, 1987

MERCER UNION

Something known about art galleries: galleries are spaces where one looks at artwork. A good space is flexible and mute, accommodating a range of work while providing an uncoloured atmosphere of no discernible limits. If boundaries are observed, or textures or colour, they signify a failure, attributable to the art, the architecture, or both.

Something else known about art galleries: galleries are spaces only up to the point at which one installs one's work. During installation, in a grinding adjustment, a space becomes a room of concrete proportion and material. The floor congeals with a particular surface. Walls rise as pitted, warped, or fabric-coated planes. The ceiling becomes a bureaucratic lid devoted to air circulation, lights, and sprinklers.

Galleries are, in a sense, theoretical, annexed to particular ideas of presentation and reception. In their detail, size, and use they continue to function within a tradition of the exhibited object, a tradition that regards some objects as capable of an existence independent of use or context.

That gallery information of the concrete and material kind often goes unremarked by the viewing public (a source of relief and amazement to artists) is attributable, in part, to this tradition, which also maintains a distance between artist and viewer; a distinction between showing and looking; a break between making and seeing. The mediation of material makes implicit the agreement that artists and viewers perform their duties autonomously and with discretion.

However, within the category of gallery, there are differences. Mercer Union is a parallel gallery. Its board of directors is comprised of artists, as is a large percentage of its visitors. This coincidence of roles provides easement for studio practice. It offers new terrain to those uncomfortable with accepted definitions and sets primary conditions for re-examining concepts such as gallery, art object, artist, and audience.

In its original location with two bunker-like rooms on Mercer Street, Mercer Union was the principal forum in Toronto for the "gallery as space/gallery as place" paradox. In memory, these galleries remain

as objects of perceptible density. Whether this was an inherent or constructed characteristic would be difficult, now, to determine. The fact remains that artists repeatedly used the galleries as basic material in attempts to render the “theory” of gallery into concrete terms. The resulting inseparability of the works from their location made unnatural an easy acceptance of the priority put on exhibition value. To view a work there was to attend to a *place* at the same time. In a non-esoteric way a ritual of installing and visiting ensued, focused on the uniqueness of the event.

That the work on Mercer Street revived notions of the cult value of art is indicated by the retention of the gallery name following its move to Adelaide Street. It attests to the excitement caused by the disruption of a reductive definition, and remains in homage to the place, the keepers of the place, and the visitors to the place.

It isn't difficult to determine to what we may attribute the wane of such site-specific activity. In part, it was Mercer's move to Adelaide Street and a pair of ordinary rooms, uncertain in size and with a diverting view of the city. In part, the art market's re-issue of permits for the production of traditional objects. More to the credit of artists, however, is the notion that they exhausted the ways to assert the gallery as present and real, and chose not to turn an option into a convention. The interest in re-definition was not confused with an interest in re-establishing an earlier definition, such as art as ceremonial object. Besides, an expanded definition of the *place* of exhibition begs an expanded definition of the *object* of exhibition. It is possible that the idea of the discrete object is untenable only so long as it is our sole choice. To reject the object for fear of aura reduces the definition of art from the opposite end and severs our esthetic and emotional responses from their source. To understand that *we* grant objects the ability to be transcendent makes a difference, and permits a reconsideration of material and objects.

A large part of this reconsideration involves subjects, forms and technology developed outside the art realm. By positioning them in the gallery, artists question the ease with which we compartmentalize and acquiesce to the major forces influencing our lives.

THE PALACE OF THE QUEEN

Of photographs extant in the world, it is possible that the majority are of people now dead. As chemical deposits of what was real, photographs are indices of people who were, emblems of what has passed. The tone of memento mori is a pervasive aspect of photography and forces it to speak of our mortality even as it records our living. This, together with the impossibility of retrieving that which we have catalogued, can make photography seem like a bad deal. However, as long as there is a chance to hold the moment we will attempt to extract the promise while deferring the threat. We face the camera confidently, to record our health and beauty; we use our children as subjects, their youth a fetish against the camera's deathful power; we record the milestones of our lives, their progression a proof that we aren't a dot but a line.

To have boxes or albums of photographs is commonplace, a condition of being a member of a family. But these albums are more than a badge of family membership, they are evidence of generations of encounter between people and technology. They represent the inexhaustible desire to represent and identify ourselves through technical and material means. The nature and consequence of this encounter is the subject of *The Palace of the Queen*.

The installation is founded on two factors: a remarkable family resemblance between the artist and her mother; and the artist's concern with the means available to record this resemblance. Disregarding the mandate for movement, super-8 film records a photograph: a picture of the mother, studio-posed, co-operative, trusting. Yet the filming of the photo would betray this trust as it puts the portrait in an impossible situation. Not only is its own paper base rejected for celluloid, but the still picture is caught in a continual loop with its subject apparently paralyzed. Unable to make the movement which would distinguish one frame from another, the subject is constrained by her choice of medium.

In response to this distress, as in a gesture of rescue, the artist takes her mother's place, engaging the recording device with a contemporary understanding of what this submission entails. In a video auto-portrait of twenty minutes duration, the artist attempts to "take" a still photograph by an action of self-control.

Being still, for so long, prolongs the instant of the shutter release, allowing room for doubt; of the validity of the project, of the correctness of the pose, of the reliability of the equipment. In her doubt, the artist compresses and embodies the ordeal of the photographic encounter, an ordeal usually begun with the release of the shutter and then measured out in moments over the years as we look through old photos. In the tape these moments pile up, constituting a force which crushes the sitter. Her evident pain and anxiety speak of the inevitability of loss; of time, of self. She reads her fate in the lens of the camera. In this living room in an urban neighbourhood, the video camera extracts its price and records its payment.

That this is a domestic drama is made explicit by the location of the video shoot, and extended by the selection and installation of the film and video equipment. The screen and projector are closeted, as they were in our homes, causing awkward access to the family movies. Video technology, by now accepted as a constant presence at home, is represented as contemporary, technical decor. Ordinary domestic objects make up the rest of the installation, drawing the film and video equipment into the realm of objects. At this point, the media themselves become insecure in their identity and betray their dependence on earlier means of representation—painted and photographic portraits.

Other objects, the possessions of the mother, are catalogued in the bookwork accompanying the installation—small things of little value, made consequential by the volume and excess of their collection. Arriving as an un-disposable inheritance to the daughter, these things are like the stacks of photographs in that they bear an identity. To discard the material is to discard the identity. One becomes bound to material which in turn is bound to technology. Finally, material change, concomitant with technological change, insists on perceptual change.

Confined to these terms, the artist seeks the identity of her mother in relation to her own. They share a strong resemblance, yet their perceivable differences are not wholly attributable to the ultimate individuality of each person. It is clear that the medium of portrayal has imposed itself on the sitter, making strained the expected affinity of mother and daughter, and futile any attempt to reunite them.

nO fiXeD aDdrESs

Physically speaking, this work is as bodyless as it is homeless. In the gallery we encounter very little: a video monitor, deck and dolly, standard rental issue; a pair of freestanding doors embellished by hand, standard studio issue; an adjustment to a false wall, exposing more of Mercer's diverting view. Yet, if we accept a taped invitation to place a phone call, we gain access to the most significant part of the work—a recorded confession/seduction engaging enough to make any material in the gallery seem unnecessary. Engaging, that is, insofar as one is interested in being lured into an uncertain relationship with an unnamed, recorded voice. Objectively, this is a relationship with a telephone unit hooked to a complex of answering machines. Psychologically it is more compelling than this fact allows. Perhaps it is our familiarity with the telephone that renders us co-operative. Perhaps we imagine that we are in control; after all, *we* place the call. But this is an exchange of dubious equity, for in return for our actual time and attention, we receive a repeatable moment and an intimacy addressed to a microphone. Furthermore, there is no attempt to obscure the contrivance.

Still, the *signs* of an authentic engagement are present: a secluded voice; a dialogue of tangents, seemingly innocent of strategy; and a basket of little things: deference, vulnerability, need. Against the odds, a desire for this quality of contact, like the desire in photography to hold the moment, operates to suspend disbelief. One holds on, lured not so much by the voice as by one's own expectations.

However, rather than intervene on our behalf, the artist extends the entrapment. At both ends of the tenure of the Mercer installation, suggestions to place the call are made publicly, on broadcast TV, in magazines and via direct mail announcements. For many respondents the context of the gallery will not be known. For these callers, the act of placing the call is included in a much larger context of solicitation and submission—the discourse of buy and sell as conducted in the mass media, using the terms of a personal relationship. Allure is the lubricant of the commercial world, used to move into our lives goods and services of no inherent empathetic capability. In the marketplace, the blurring of distinction between two orders of engagement (subject to subject, and subject to object), makes it possible to market material by activating our desire for the non-material.

Using these tactics, the artist, as broker of this particular, small exchange, has withheld her presence. In the gallery, the resurfaced doors represent vestigial evidence of the artist; out of the gallery, she offers no identifying mark. The respondent, in privacy, is free to consume, or attempt to consume, the delicious voice. Ultimately, however, there is nothing to get, have or take, and it is in this negative dimension that the artist finally asserts herself. Rather than slipping us a surrogate—a message, a product—she choreographs a hasty exit for her aural mannequin, leaving us with a void into which we can only drop our own voice. In extending ourselves to swallow the sensation, we surpass it and swallow the machine.

If the announce mode has engaged our credulity, the answer mode engages our critical awareness. Up to this point our power of assessment has attended to the credibility, sanity, identity of the telephone voice. Suddenly, the microphone thrust at the caller, an urgent appraisal of the means of delivery is required, raising questions concerning the ownership, mechanics and intentions of the machine. The technology at hand, prepared now to record *our* breathing, *our* hesitation, *our* response, for a concealed listener, is the same which seconds ago provided us with our own concealment. Once again, the terms of the pact with technology are being exacted.

On reflection, the embrace of the toothed technology is familiar, encountered on a daily basis in the form of equipment projecting human voice or image. The ubiquity of this human-ness indicates needs greater than that of simple convenience or utility. It indicates an extensive conflation of our material and non-material needs, sponsored perhaps, by an unwillingness to know or identify things by any process other than self-reference. Our subjective response, considered a deep and private resource, has been tapped and dispersed, squandered by unscrupulous managers with our own naive consent.

That the artist mimics this strategy so well must arouse our suspicion. Is she in fact as unscrupulous as those she would critique? Since nothing has been taken, we can't accuse her of exploitation. But is this art, or just a clever ruse? Have we ended up the object of her contempt? The balance lies in the voice. In the absence of any substantial sign of the artist, the voice comes to represent her, the identity beneath the persona where director and actor converge. But

even in the unity of roles there is no tendency toward authority. The voice fails to identify itself or state its intention. After a series of feints, it retires, having accomplished nothing but a pathetic manipulation of emotions. If this is the artist, she doesn't live up to our expectations and her hegemony doesn't materialize. She isn't conning us, she can't guide us. Having invested everything in the voice, she and her callers arrive at an impasse. In matters of control and submission, it appears the artist is not exempt. In fact, one could interpret this as an admission—that we have all accepted the machine.

MERCER UNION

A large part of these installations involves subjects, forms, and technology developed outside the art realm. By positioning them in the gallery, the artists question the ease with which we compartmentalize and acquiesce to the major forces influencing our lives.

As all the technology used here is “off the shelf,” available to any shopper, and as much of it is transmittable via the airwaves, doesn't the technology itself preclude the need for a traditional art venue such as the gallery? Why does something that can be received every “place” need such a specific place as residence? Don't these works suggest redundancy of both studio and gallery activity?

Perhaps a consideration of the contradiction is prefigured in the titles given each work by the artists—*The Palace of the Queen*, *nO fiXeD aDdrESs*—both refer to place. One conjures an exaggerated place, the other, a lack or absence of place; yet both take direction from an ideology that claims an individual to be properly located at a single, private place—a dwelling place. By speaking of the domestic, and its attendant modifiers, private and personal, in the gallery, a displacement of the gallery's own ideology as a residence for the emblems of the private and personal is necessitated. For in comparison with our homes, the gallery is an exceedingly public place. And while the manifest content of the work here is of a personal nature, both installations speak, finally, of the difficulty of effecting such communication independent of mediation, specifically, technological mediation. In the interests of credibility, therefore, the gallery needs to redefine itself, to make a place for itself somewhere between the folly

of competing with mass media, and the hubris of claiming proprietary rights to the private and personal.

Both artists use video in installation, a gesture in itself, paradoxical. Video, with its unshakeable public persona—television—is time-based, broadcastable. Gallery installation, with its august mentor—sculpture—is static, material deposited. The gallery, then, is in the weird position of holding the unstill, conserving the ever-changing. But, as it happens here, perhaps it is possible. With the initial shift of the concept “gallery,” other things are nudged, forming a concatenation of adjusted perceptions.

The art has either anticipated or caused this. In *The Palace of the Queen*, video equipment used as furniture renders its technology object-like; still photos become agitated on film and tape; objects acquire a time-base as they conform to a narrative sequence. In *nOfiXeD aDdrESs*, conserving walls are revealed as non-structural, temporary; filtered windows impede one’s habitual view of the city while newly exposed windows pull the gallery back into the city’s movement.

Finally, the heterogeneity of sources for images and objects acknowledges a particular social eclecticism. In spite of our nominal identification with the latest technological development, i.e., “the electronic age,” the ways and means of past periods linger. For practical if not emotional reasons, there remains a co-existence of production means in industry and culture, a co-existence obscured by the inspiration of the new which renders yesterday’s methods subordinate, discredited. In these installations there is an interdependence of technologies: electronic, mechanical, artisanal. These are specific situations in which an application of the newest technology is dependent on the presence of the oldest. Technology, after all, is not defined as “electronic” or “semiconductor,” but “as a means of producing,” slow, fast, industrial, or otherwise.

In this sense then, these works are not a renunciation of studio practice or gallery relevance, but act to restore meaning to a term. Using the gallery within a context of technology defines the gallery as a means of production. The consequence of interchanging the qualities of the medium, site and material, is to make possible the perception of the gallery as a form of communication, a broadcast medium. That

galleries have always been a means of disseminating ideas and mores is the point. It becomes another thing about galleries that we may actively know, allowing ourselves to use them in ways which are more relevant to our needs.

As the gallery presents itself as a legitimate forum for representation, these installations consider the offer on the same terms they apply to other recording and replay equipment. That is, they contrive situations that test the real ability of this technology to deliver an identity. In both installations not only are the difficulties inherent in the pact with technology made explicit as they may concern the viewer, but underlying this exposure is an admission of involvement on the part of artists. Each reveals, in a different way, her own dependence on material and technology as a means of representation, and, while the clarity of identity obtained under these conditions remains problematic, each proceeds. That they continue, albeit with doubt, to search for satisfactory representation becomes important. For both artist and viewer, this perseverance sustains a valid expectation that, ultimately, something of subjective value can be extracted from an overwhelmingly material and technological existence.

Auto Portrait

Published in *instabili : La question du sujet / The Question of Subject*, eds. Marie Fraser and Lesley Johnstone (Montreal: La Centrale (Galerie Powerhouse) and Artexte, 1990). Reproduced in 2011 by Susan Hobbs Gallery in *The Most She Weighed/The Least She Weighed: a reader*, and republished in English and French in *Liz Magor: The Blue One Comes in Black* (Marseille: Triangle France; Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2015)

Shortly after Samuel Beckett's death, I again heard the story of how Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil leapt from her bicycle to rescue the writer as he lay dying in a Paris street with a stab wound in his chest. And how, after helping him recover from his grave injury, she devoted her life to his work by organizing everything for him, from homeopathic diets to publishing contracts. It could be argued that Beckett's life was saved first by his overcoat, and then by Suzanne. The coat, by virtue of its thick cloth, prevented the knife from penetrating his heart and, pinned to his chest, offered a felty swaddling, keeping the knife out and the body in, as the spider-legs gave way, and Beckett fell to the ground.

The scene: a lamp-lit alley. The attacker runs into the shadows; demi-monde type, greasy hair, tight skivvy, elevated shoes. The bike enters; balloon tires, a tubular, curved frame and high, wide handlebars. It falls to the ground. A woman runs to Beckett's side. Do her shoes make a noise on the wet stones? Does her skirt spread out around her as she bends down? Is her hair loose? (Blond? Black?) Does it fall forward as she leans to look at him? Is she a nurse, a Nightingale? Is she Estragon already, an Irish *butty* in a big coat?

She *was* something, I think. Training to *BE* something. On her way home from somewhere. She's wearing a dress, mid-calf, with a neat pair of flats on her perfect dancer's feet. Or is she a painter in black pants? Was this before the war or after? Her hair must be short. She could be a writer: tight, grey suit, white shirt. This would have her walking the bike as she approaches, leaving a hand free to hold a cigarette. But this is Beckett again. Now all social costumes dissolve, giving way to a stranger image: a cowl, a tunic, a habit, a shirt of hair. She leaps from her bike in robes. But this is Squeaky Fromme.

To clear things up, I turn to biographies, expecting to find photographs of this selfless assistant. I even anticipate a picture of the rescue itself, a tableau of all the players: the bike, the knife, the pimp, the coat, the writer, and the rescuer. But there is no photograph of that night, as there is no photograph of Suzanne—though Beckett is everywhere. A beautiful, wounded bird. An edgy line of pain in every picture. I search the group shots for his female equivalent, knowing that together they will make a dark track over the field of healthy people. She's not there. I find only one photograph that includes

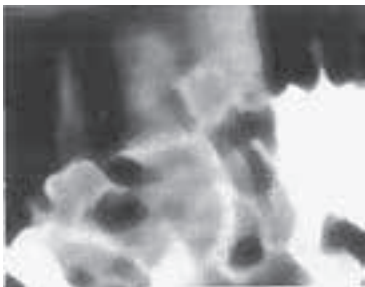
AUTO PORTRAIT



Nora Joyce: Jersey blouse gathered at the shoulder, belted at the hip. Small, contrasting collar. Polka-dot crepe de chine skirt, flounced. Silver pin with onyx centre. Long strand of onyx beads. Hair waved with scalloped edge framing the face.



Teha'amana: Ankle length, cotton missionary dress. Bodice yoked and shirred. Batiste scarf knotted at the left shoulder. Flowers over right ear. Hair worn long and loose. One lock curled on the forehead.



Coretta King: Black wool dress with squared neckline. Three-quarter length sleeves, set-in. Large corsage with tulle and ribbon bow. Gold watch. White drop earrings. Hair loose, high at the crown, off the forehead.

her, a snapshot, really, of three small, fuzzy people in a garden. It was taken at Ussé in 1952. Beckett's brother Frank is in the middle. His right arm encircles Sam from behind and clasps him under the arm and high on the chest. He is pulling Sam in, literally holding him in the picture.

Suzanne assists in this endeavour by standing on Frank's other side. With her body close to his, they are united as a counterbalance to Sam's entropic lean to the left. She's wearing a suit with a pleated skirt and tailored jacket. She has a brooch on her jacket and a leather bag hooked over her left shoulder. Her hair is blond and waved. She's smiling. She is not a wraith. She appears to be normal.

I am surprised by her substance. I was expecting a ghost. Or perhaps this photograph of three people in a garden has brought another to mind: Virginia Woolf, T.S. Eliot, and his first wife, Vivienne, are in a garden in the summer of 1932. Virginia is in the middle. She seems completely at ease, both with her company and in her clothes, wearing a cardigan and blouse, skirt, sunhat, beads, and flat, laced shoes.

She leans toward Tom and away from Vivienne. Her right arm overlaps Tom's while her left, akimbo, thrusts its elbow at Vivienne, driving her toward the edge of the frame. In Virginia's mind, at least, this is a portrait of two writers. Vivienne, thus banished, draws her feet together, pulls her arms back and disappears, offering her body as a lifeless rack for her outfit. Hers is a coordinated ensemble: garden dress, stockings, and shoes—all in white and held down by an embellished, wide-brimmed hat. The intention, clearly, is to cut a sweet figure, evoking childhood and innocence with maybe a touch of Alice. Standing beside the giantess, Vivienne appears small enough to pull it off, but her Wonderland must be a horror if it could freeze her in such a posture of anxiety. Her own body betrays her disguise and the carefully selected costume becomes a shroud for a dissolving self.

Tom, of course, way over on the other side seems oblivious to all this, just as he seems oblivious to the weather. In contrast to his wife's short-sleeved summer dress, he is wearing a thick, tweedy suit with a vest. Perhaps this failure to notice things accounts for his being photographed *sans* spouse for the next twenty-five years. In any case

a second wife doesn't appear until 1957, and, when she does, you can tell by her clothes that she's more appropriate.

Just as Suzanne leapt from her bike to scoop up Samuel Beckett, so Valerie Fletcher leapt from hers to scoop up loose papers. At the age of fourteen, she declared her intention to serve as secretary to a celebrated writer, and realized her ambition in 1950 when she reached T.S. Eliot's desk. In his service she evolved from secretary, to spouse, to literary executrix, extending her care to the posthumous. Valerie was frequently photographed: at Eliot's side during his lifetime, and as his representative after his death. Like a politician's wife she dresses with an understanding of her public responsibility. She is costumed but doesn't appear to be, so closely does she conform to the fashions of the time. As with others who appeal to the confidence of the public, she uses fashion to present the paradox of being willing to change while remaining conservative. Always her pleasure and flourish in dressing are restrained; the evening dress that hovers on the far edge of the shoulders, not daring to slide into straplessness; the silver fox collar and hat that would never conspire to being a full fur coat.

But Valerie's clothes diverge from those of the public figure, if not in appearance, at least in function. She can be seen as offering assurance more than seeking it, as her constituency was but one person—Tom Eliot, from whom she had a mandate for life. Both her public and private selves were charged with maintaining his work, so her wardrobe also took on a double role. While her correct hem lines declared to the world that all was well with the genius, her command of the codes of fashion just as effectively assured her melancholy poet that all was right with the world.

The harder task fell to Nora Joyce insofar as assurances of normalcy were concerned, and it appears that she took to fashion for recreation rather than for duty. She exercised her interest extravagantly when means allowed, outfitting the whole family *à la mode* down to the last shoe buckle. Yet for some reason the stylishness attributed to James, Lucia, and Giorgio does not attach itself to Nora. In his portraits, Joyce's wonderful elegance seems inherent and his characteristic vanity is seldom extended to his wife. Perhaps this is consistent with the perceived differences between them—he was literate, she was not; he was intellectual, she was not; he was frail, she was not; he was

SUBJECT TO CHANGE



Alma Mahler: Alpaca dress with high collar. Gathered sleeve caps. Bodice full in front, pulled in at waist with a sash. Shell cameo at the throat. Gold chain and locket. Hair piled on the head with a chignon at the nape.

Anna Freud: Dark cashmere cardigan. Tortoise-shell buttons. Grey pleated wool skirt. Double strand of jade beads. Round-faced watch with brown leather strap. Hair cut short, unstyled.



Chiang Ch'ing: Heavy-weight cotton overcoat with wide lapels. Cotton pants and skirt, loose fitting. Buttoned breast pockets and safari pockets at the hip. Hair, short bob, parted in the centre.



natty, she was not. This idea is reinforced by the conflation of Nora's identity with Molly Bloom's—drawn as a large, female thing with a mouth, who would no more punctuate her appearance with fashion than her speech with pauses. Besides, who needs clothes when one is constantly abed?

The aspects of his wife's identity that obsessed James Joyce certainly didn't encompass all that she embodied, yet the accounts of who she was have consistently sided with the literary portrait over historical accounts. Photographs, anecdotes, and letters concerning the Joyces are a finite resource and are subject to various arrangements. For example, in Richard Ellman's 1959 biography of Joyce, there is only one photograph of Nora alone. She's in costume for a play—Synge's *Riders to the Sea*—and consequently is barefoot, wearing a peasant skirt and flowered blouse. Her blouse is wrinkled and her cuffs unfastened. The effect is rural: free, natural, careless. In the rest of the book there are no pictures of Nora without a hat; we never see her hair or her hands. She is usually buried in a crowd or lost in the murky resolution of the photographic emulsion. Like Vivienne Eliot she is so close to the edge, margins, and nether worlds of the pictures that she is at risk of dropping out of sight and memory altogether. She takes on the characteristics of the pictures and seems indistinct and forgettable. But a rearrangement of documents by Helen Maddox in 1988 shows more, including a beautiful portrait by Berenice Abbott that reveals Nora as a match for Joyce—at least in terms of self-esteem. For his cane top, she has marcelled hair; for his ringed fingers, her pins and beads; for his stripes, her polka dots; for his bow tie, her lace collar. More surprising is a studio portrait taken in 1935, the glamour of which is attributable as much to Nora's own regal posture as to studio lighting. The elegance of this portrait is generated by the subject herself who comments on her own pale skin and silver hair by wearing a black dress with white fox fur. This photograph confounds the image of Nora as a barefoot girl of Galway, instead a sophisticated Parisienne who frequents the same designer as Marlene Dietrich.

In terms of how people are represented in a given work—through photography or writing—there's a question as to whether or not the real-life models for stories fare better than those for pictures. People who end up in books are usually given full treatment: a name, a context, a role. Often they are depicted so faithfully that they can be

traced as being the inspiration for a character. Certainly the tenure for the literary model is quieter and longer because its effectiveness as a subject is dependent upon the slow formation of a psychological shape. Models and muses for visual artists, on the other hand, may be better able to protect their identity as they can confine their offering; they retain proprietary rights to subjecthood.

Both the nudity and the costume of the model in the studio are abstractions and act as camouflage for the sitter. The figure doesn't refer to a psyche as much as it refers to how light plays on the surface of the body. However, looking at photographs of models at work, one tries to look under the skin for a name or a notion of self. The hair is checked for style, the face for makeup, the body for features that may generate empathy. But consistently the body remains generic in the studio; it's not a body but a figure, and no particular person resides there.

Think of Teha'amana. Left alone in the dark in Paul Gauguin's hut, she flings herself in terror onto the bed and is found there when the painter returns. He is moved by the intensity of her fear and her perception of what surrounds her in the dark. He decides to paint the scene. But what he paints is a beautiful pattern, with a brown figure as part of an arrangement of colours. This is not a Zelda Fitzgerald situation. Teha'amana can jump up, leaving the brown body behind, and tell her own story of what happened that night, not that we'll ever hear it, but, if we did, we would not confuse it with the other.

In fact, Teha'amana did jump up and tell a bit about herself. She sat for a photograph. She is sitting, not lying on a bed or a beach. Her hair is very shiny and she has two flowers tucked, Tahitian style, over her right ear. She's wearing a cotton dress, the kind distributed by missionaries in a bid to cover up the miles of pagan skin they encountered, and instill a notion of Christian modesty. It looks something like a nightdress, loose, with a shirred bodice and high neckline. If nothing else, the conflicting signs of the flower and the dress situate Teha'amana at a point of cultural change for her people. We can only speculate that the choices concerning her appearance in this photograph indicate her feelings or opinions on questions central to her identity.

Granted, CHOICE may be too strong a word—not just for Teha'amana, but also for Nora, Valerie, and Suzanne. Getting dressed is a social act, negotiating what is desired and what is allowed. To wear clothes is to speak in a public language about one's status, sensibilities, and expectations. A choice with regard to appearance is checked on every side and often seems the result more of coercion than of deliberation. There may be no choice that hasn't already been made. There may be nothing to wear but conventions.

But the best thing about conventions is that there are so many of them. If dress is a language, then the conventions of dress are its units, and they abound. In the inexhaustible recombinations of fashion's bits and pieces, a potential for expression can be found—not an expression inclined to profundity, but something exquisitely superficial. Fashion's qualities are best enumerated in a kind of inverted list of what modern art is: fashion is NOT private, it IS substantial and representational, and its trajectory is ALWAYS described in full public view.

For some, the extroversion of clothing is a sublimation of what is hidden or invisible. For others, subjected to massive doses of introspection through their service to art or artists, dressing becomes a critical alternative, a parallel to private production. It is the negotiation of an identity that is separate from work. It is the arrangement of one's appearance synchronized with the arrangement of an environment for thinking. It becomes a declaration of the real from one who serves the abstract.

When Nora left Dublin in 1904, she wasn't sailing into exile only as Joyce's companion. In large part, she was embarking on a journey alone, navigating the dense fog of his self-absorption, in constant danger of being obliterated by the blanket of his work and interiority. Photographs log this thirty-five-year marriage, documenting her survival in terms that she could command. With Nora, and others like her, each bead, button, and bow is a triumph of self-representation. Everything she wore is a marker on the flooded landscape that was her life, and her clothes and jewelry still bob, like painted buoys, defying the vast sea of obscurity that surrounds her.



LIZ MAGOR
"TIME & MAX TIBEX"
Acc # 18831

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An Artist's Thoughts on Conservation and Curatorial Issues

Published in *Shared Responsibility: Proceedings of a Seminar for Curators
and Conservators*, eds. Barbara A. Ramsay Jolicoeur and
Ian N. M. Wainwright (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1990).
The seminar was held on October 26–28, 1989

1

Sculpture. Wooden shelf with jars of preserves, recipe box, forks, glass tops, rubbers sealers, metal lids, cardboard boxes, enamel cup, tin can. 214.6 x 90.5 x 32.4 cm. Collection: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (Accession number 18831).



I have no doubt that my invitation to this seminar is attributable to the fact that, in 1977, the National Gallery of Canada purchased from me a work entitled *Time and Mrs. Tiber* (1976).¹ The subsequent correspondence, intervention, documentation, and discussion, pertaining to the physical condition of this work, has resulted in a mass of material equivalent in volume to the sculpture itself, and has suggested a parallel career for me—the first half of my life creating work; the second half overseeing its disintegration. When *Time and Mrs. Tiber* was purchased, we all knew—the curator, the conservators, and myself—that it was unstable, and subject to slow deterioration. In fact, death, decay, and entropy constitute both the physical and intellectual content of the work, the form being several dozen canning jars filled with various vegetable substances. These provisions had been put up by a West Coast homesteader in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and it was my intention to honour and preserve the evidence of Mrs. Tiber's rescue of the crop of 1948.

Of course, with arrival of the sculpture in Ottawa, intentions were curbed as I found the conservators intent on honouring and preserving my intentions vis-à-vis Mrs. Tiber and her intentions. This was my first experience of the complexities of longevity—the joining of Mrs. Tiber's desire to extend the life of a fruit for the season, to my desire to hold it for a lifetime, to the museum's desire to maintain it in perpetuity.

Although *Time and Mrs. Tiber* may be an extreme case, the contrast in the perception of time is in some way present in much of the contemporary work I see today. The polarity is the museum on one side, the street on the other, and the artist's studio in the middle. Sensitive to both extremes, the artist must decide with which environment a work is meant to identify, and then consider the subsequent risks and compromises. Generally speaking, contemporary art comes from an artist's desire to slow down and hold, for purposes of consideration, the thoughts, objects, materials, processes, and images encountered on a daily basis. Whether cultural or natural in origin, this material is largely ephemeral, essentially intended for current or seasonal consumption. While the traditional artist may render such subjects in materials relatively impervious to the passage of time, the contemporary artist attempts to inhabit the subject by working in materials and techniques which correspond more closely to the character of

that subject. This desire to maintain the identity of form and subject, given that the subject itself is of the fugitive and unstable, appears to be inimical to the notion of preservation—as impossible as stretching a moment into a decade—or would be if there were not found, alongside the artist's admission of vulnerability, a contributing *cause* of that vulnerability, which harbours a key to the preservation of an artist's intention.

What I am talking about is the notion of reproducibility or mechanical reproduction—the basis of industrial production increasingly legitimized in art production; though still a debated issue which has polarized art media into painting versus just about everything else. The most frequently cited text in this discussion is Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,"² which claims there is a substantive change in our reception of art works following their photographic reproduction and image broadcast. As Benjamin questions the aura and authenticity of a painting under modern conditions, Rosalind Krauss resists the term "authentic" in the case of a 1978 cast of Rodin's *Gates of Hell* in her essay "The Originality of the Avant-Garde."³

If you take these and other essays on aesthetics, and add to them the contemporary social theories which dismantle accepted ideas of individuality, proposing instead a constructed identity over an essential or unique identity, you have the primary texts of new conditions for art-making.

In the most extreme cases, these new conditions redefine the studio as a typewriter, a telephone, and a book of yellow pages, with the art work being jobbed out to various commercial plants. I imagine conservation, in this case, would simply be to maintain a good list of telephone numbers. However, most artists have not gone to this extreme, maintaining some traditions of the studio in the production of their work.

My work falls into this category, and I thought I might use it to explore some ideas on the compatibility of artisanal production and mechanical reproduction. There may also be an opportunity to reflect on the subjective nature of distinguishing the authentic from the false. With respect to *Time and Mrs. Tiber*, at a very early stage, the

2

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935), in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217–51.

3

Rosalind E. Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 151–70.

4

Barbara Keyser, "Time and Mrs. Tiber and Food Technology," *Journal of the International Institute for Conservation - Canadian Group* 7, nos. 1/2 (Spring 1982): 47–52.

5

Marion Barclay and Richard Gagnier, "Is Time Up for Time and Mrs. Tiber?" *Journal of the International Institute for Conservation - Canadian Group* 13 (1988): 3–7.

6

Five pressed components: fabric, grass, glue, and wood; 1 machine press: wood, steel. Each component: 30 x 179 x 46 cm; machine press: 81 x 183 x 83.9 cm. Collection: Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



conservators and I came to an agreement as to the minimal intervention needed to adapt the preserves to their new environment. This involved the application of a new sealant under the lids, retarding oxidization, but not altogether preventing fermentation.⁴ It was my request that we aim for a sixty- to seventy-year lifespan. Nevertheless, in 1987, three jars were found to contain botulism, and the word "de-accession" entered the discussion.⁵ This seemed drastic, and I suggested replacing the three contaminated jars in order to save the lot. The preserves in the work are of various vintage anyway, including some I added in 1975. In fact, when I examined the three bad jars, I found that they had been prepared by me, not by Mrs. Tiber, and I felt encouraged in my decision to replace them. I contacted an experienced homemaker, Margaret Coburn of Burlington, Ontario, and together we put up about two dozen jars of food. All of these were sent to the National Gallery to be used as replacements when needed. (Also, when needed, I can imagine changing the name of the work to *Time and Mrs. Coburn*.)

The next work to be discussed is *Four Boys and a Girl* (1979),⁶ an image of very rudimentary mechanical reproduction which implies, mostly through the title, an image of biological reproduction. This work grew out of a fascination with an object I saw in the Museum of Cairo—it was a bed of grass in the shape of a human body, upon which the dead body of King Tutankhamen was to be placed before his mummification. The grass, though dry and dead, was still intact (which makes me wonder whether the conservators simply grew a new batch every spring). *Four Boys and a Girl* consists of a pressing machine which generated five large slabs of material, ranging from a solid slab of grass clippings to a solid slab of fabric. I used watered-down white glue just as a binder, but with compression the slabs turned out hard. However, due to rough handling in travel, one slab broke in half, and was beyond repair. So I prepared a bag of clippings from my compost in Vancouver, took it on a plane to Winnipeg, and cast another slab in the basement of the gallery. The new slab has a different thickness and colour than the old one; I did not attempt to make a match. What counts is that the mould is the same for the new slab as for the others, so I think of the new slab as authentic and original. I do not think of it as a replacement.

The most difficult work to deal with has been *Dorothy—A Resemblance* (1980–81),⁷ though at first it seemed to have a more obvious aspect of reproduction. It consists of four tables—each loaded with small, cast lead objects. The objects of each type are cast from the same plaster mould, making each successive cast a recording of the deterioration of the mould. Therefore, objects that appear identical are, in fact, unique, and one's first impression, the generic, gives way to the subtleties of difference. In order to engage the viewer long enough to reveal this difference, I wanted the objects to be appealing and desirable. I also wanted the *appearance* of difference to become real—so, under certain circumstances, a viewer may pick up an object and feel its significant weight. And, of course, viewers do pick them up—and put them in their pockets.

In order to replace the missing objects from *Dorothy—A Resemblance*, also in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada, another artist was contracted to make a mould from a like object and cast a replacement. This seemed satisfactory, until I noticed that I could easily tell which pieces were replacements. Paradoxically, the replacements distinguished themselves by being made too well. When I made the work in the first place, I was under many pressures. I saw that I had many pieces to cast. I was concerned about the toxicity of the material, and wanted a minimal exposure to the lead fumes. I worked with poor tools—a saucepan with a badly attached handle, a slow-heating hot plate, a ripped pair of kitchen oven mitts. And my mould materials were the cheapest—plaster with a bit of sand, subject to cracking and crumbling. These things, combined with the heat and weight of the lead, and the certainty that I was going to spill hot lead all over my arm at any moment, led me to accept nearly every casting, giving priority to the building up of stock, over the making of perfect images. As a result, the process and materiality of the work is very evident, co-existing with the image and concept, and providing a tension or instability that I value. In spite of the fact that it is a piece made up of many parts, it was forged as a whole, and any replacement is unable to be part of that moment. The problem is the absence of the original mould. In hindsight, I wish that I had made a mould of every single piece before it was ever exhibited.

The conservators at the National Gallery and I have discussed making a replica of *Dorothy—A Resemblance* for exhibition, but it has proven to

7

Assemblage. Lead and steel. 90 x 121.5 x 86 cm, Collection: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (Accession number 28142).



8

The National Gallery of Canada has a “Restricted List” of works of art in its collections which, because of their inherent fragility, vulnerability, history of damage or deterioration, or value or significance to the collections, are restricted in their availability for loan or travelling exhibition purposes.

be too expensive. So this work is on the National Gallery Restricted List,⁸ which makes me very unhappy, although I have to agree with it under the circumstances. And the curator and conservators have been flexible on the issue, allowing for exceptions.

On these occasions, I have installed the work with the intention of providing a psychological barrier to touching, rather than a physical one. I chose a smaller space and had alcoves constructed. I increased the light onto the objects, and dropped the ambient light, to make the objects seem less ordinary and available. This is more like museum lighting than normal gallery lighting, and I am thinking about presentation as a form of protection.

This is consistent with a shift in the theory and practice of contemporary art. Artists of my generation more directly think of themselves as producers of cultural artifacts than as conduits of natural phenomena. We regard the gallery, not as a natural or neutral space, some architectural equivalent of a field in which you might find great, near-natural sculptural forms, but as a very mediated, controlled, and controlling environment.

9

Installation. Hollow cardboard pillars covered with vinyl, sculptural components made of plywood, rag paper, linoleum, photographic mural. Installation area 900 sq. ft. Collection: Ydessa Hendeles Foundation (now Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation), Toronto, ON.

I frequently use photographs in my work, and again need to exploit the idea of a gallery as a controlled environment. In the work *Regal Decor* (1986),⁹ a large photomural is mounted on a shaped form with no glass protection. In consideration of its vulnerability, but in a manner that enhances my conceptual intentions, I have provided the photograph with its own theatre. There is an apron of linoleum on the floor, and the intense light from above that claims a wedge of territory in front of the picture. If the photograph does sustain damage, it is reproducible at a commercial laboratory, using an 8 x 10 negative which I keep in a safe deposit box.

10

Photographs. Ten silver gelatin prints. Each 16 x 20 cm. (Edition of three) Collection of the artist.

But not all of my photographic work can be reproduced in a straight, unmanipulated enlargement, as in the case of *Regal Decor*. In the suite of photographs *Fieldwork* (1989),¹⁰ each photograph is the result of darkroom fiddling, most of which I could not repeat if I wanted to. However, from the conceptual base already referred to, my technical and conceptual requirements converge, making it possible for me to re-photograph my first successful print and, with that 4 x 5 negative, produce identical prints as I may need them. These are photographs

of photographs, and I think of them as the real prints. I hope I have made it clear that this is not simply a practical solution to protecting my work, but an integral step in the concept of the work which, in this case, is about degrees of authenticity in the identity of a human subject. To reiterate this concern through the material, i.e., to explore the degrees of authenticity in the identity of the photograph, is a welcome elaboration of my theme.

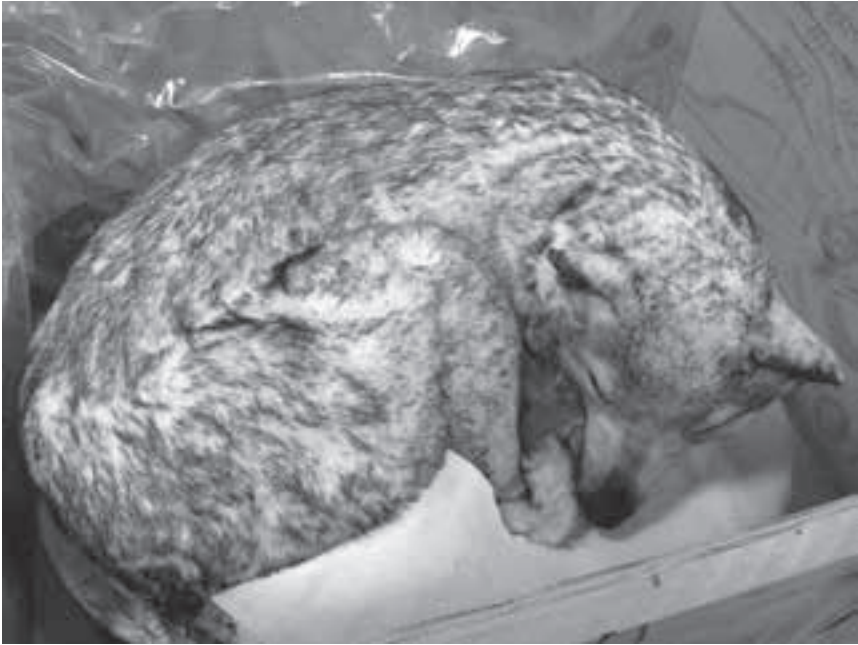
Given all this attention to the ease of reproduction, I have to admit that I continue to make works that are fragile, unreproducible, and unstable. In the work, *Child's Sweater* (1989),¹¹ the aspect of craft in the weaving, and the skull form, make them resistant to mechanical reproduction, also to be true to my idea of the meaning of the piece, I had to use “poor” materials—brown paper and corrugated cardboard—with a high acid content. This work will be a problem in terms of conservation, as much for me as for everyone else, and I certainly did not make it in some spontaneous burst. I thought carefully about the materials, but could find no satisfactory alternatives. I hope that, on balance, the extra attention needed for this work will be available due to the independence of the other works.

Artists vary in their attitude toward the historical importance of the work they produce. I should put my foregoing remarks in this context. I think of the life of a work as correlated to my own. Each thing made is part of a larger activity that includes writing, speaking, teaching, and exhibiting. The most that I ask is that all of my work be fully available, and in good condition, during this short span, and I balance the deleterious effects of time, handling, and exhibiting against this need. If there is anything left at the end of fifty years of greasy fingers, bumpy roads, and leaky studios, I can only see it as a bonus, and thank my friends, the conservators, for it.

11

Assemblage. Cowichan-style sweater, heron skull of cardboard and paper tape, hanging of woven paper and twine with iron oxide red paint. 360.7 x 198 cm. Collection: National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (Accession number 30723).





Statement for *Siberian Husky*

Published in *Liz Magor*, one of three artists' books that accompanied the catalogue for *Meeting Place: Robert Gober, Liz Magor, and Juan Muñoz*, an exhibition at the Art Gallery of York University, September 26–October 28, 1990; the Nickle Gallery at the University of Calgary, February 22–April 7, 1991; and the Vancouver Art Gallery, May 8–July 7, 1991

We're on a long journey in a landscape with no features; like an endless field of ice. We're blinded by the whiteness and have to travel with our heads down, pulling heavy loads over the rough surface. At times we have dogs to help us pull, but they either fight with each other or get tangled in the lines. Their legs come off easily and the trail is littered with their limbs and bits of stuffing. I pick up a very small dog and put it inside my parka. I can feel its warmth seeping into my body. I develop tender feelings toward it and feel distraught when I lose it at some point. I'm looking for the dog but then we're looking for some food that's cached at a depot. When we get there we find there isn't enough. My foot hurts. We're in a tent and someone says, "I'm just going outside and may be gone for some time." He goes into the blizzard and we never see him again.¹

1

An echo of Lawrence Oates (1880–1912), a British army officer and member of Robert Scott's second Antarctic expedition who walked out of his tent into a blizzard in the hopes of increasing his companions' chances of survival. They died about twelve days later.



THAT ACTION AND DANGER
MAY HAVE FORGOTTEN THE RISK
HE PICKED IN HIS HEART...

Home and Native Land

Published in *Texts* 8 (Summer 1992) and based on a presentation at
“Where To? Post-Colonial Manceuvres: (National) Identity, Place,
and Practice,” a conference held at the Edmonton Art Gallery
(now the Art Gallery of Alberta) on November 15–17, 1991

To qualify and direct this symposium, “Post-Colonial Manœuvres: (National) Identity, Place, and Practice,” the organizer has appended to the agenda a series of questions, each fashioned in such a way as to “fit” an individual speaker. Of the questions “How do you define centre and periphery when considering the location of your practice?”; “To what extent has belonging to a minority or non-dominant group affected your work?”; “How do you define or position yourself within a relativist, pluralistic society?”; “What do you think are the implications in practice of someone from a ‘privileged’ position borrowing imagery from an oppressed or marginalized culture?” all but one assumes the subject is in some way marginalized, and all but one allows for room to speak of marginalization as having potential for empowerment. Unfortunately, the exception, the uncomfortable, unanswerable last question was fashioned for me.

Proceeding as it does from one assumption—that one’s practice is defined as borrowing, to another—that this practice pivots on an imbalance, the question effectively answers itself, positing in one sentence a condition of power relations that are being exploited. Under the circumstances, outright denial seems like my best option. But, since that would only postpone an inevitable reckoning, allow me instead to rephrase the question to read as follows: “Why and how does an artist proceed to examine an identity that is constructed within a context of power and privilege?” With this adjustment, I leave the issue of borrowing and my relationship to another culture moot for the time being, while maintaining my association with privilege, which I can’t deny, and which, after all, is the only status to which I have the authority to attest.

Answering to the designation “privileged” is a new responsibility for me, since up to this time, my role on a panel addressing issues of contemporary art would be to represent the marginalized—in my case, women—and I would have found mine as the only female name on the roster. As the gender breakdown for this conference proves, women’s rights and interests, though still embattled, are firmly on the agenda.

On the assembly line of liberation movements, then, my social status as a woman is considered road-worthy, and I concur, though I roll onto the open road with some trepidation. That I have been afforded

this ability at all defines privilege for me. The organizer, I believe, uses the term to designate one as “White” or Anglo-Saxon, but I see it very distinctly as deriving from the fact that for over twenty years, great intellectual and political attention has been paid to women’s issues. My privilege is that I have been the beneficiary of this vast and significant social movement; my power comes from having a credible framework for understanding the incoherent and incapacitating facets of my life.

Obviously, the trajectory of my emancipation is evident in my work, not only as its subject, but as its very means and methods for speaking. In a bookwork from 1982 called *Four Notable Bakers*, I begin with portraits of British bakers from the last century. From their demeanor, it is obvious that these businessmen enjoy all the permission and respect a community can bestow. The status of those inside the book, however, is different; pictures of women and children taken from medical journals are juxtaposed with images of the industrial production of bread. Re-issued in this context, the images of bodies go beyond demonstrations of various pathologies to speak more acutely of the body as a site of coercion and control. Every image in my book is taken from another, a fact I make no effort to conceal but actually flaunt through the obvious display of the half-tone dot. These pictures are not simulations, and I want my theft to be noticed as proof that I infiltrated the offices of the authorities. This strategy of appropriation, initiated by John Heartfield in the 1930s, was taken up by feminists in the 1970s as a way to wrest speech from its usual course. Having lost their own, indigenous speech, women were obliged to use existing terms, manipulating them into unnatural combinations which forced an emptying out of accepted meanings, and which rendered text and image co-operative in the expression of sub-text.

I welcomed this approach and, through the 1980s, I depended on it as a means of expression, risking the dangers inherent in leaving one authority for another. Strategies, or idioms, or theories are—ultimately—only as capable as their employers. Too often, they serve as an obvious aid, like trainer wheels on the bicycle of expression. A work is not successful only because it assumes a contemporary attitude and a relevant topic; many other things must be attendant to render the work significant and engaging. It has to go beyond a competent demonstration of facts or ideas and seek a direct correspondence

with the perceived experience of the artist and/or viewer. By 1987, I felt I was drifting away from these goals when I recognized that the theories I held to be most valid diverged at significant points from many of my unchecked responses. This attests not to the failure of these ideas, but to their efficacy in delivering me to new and unexpected considerations.



Although the gap between my thoughts and feelings had to be addressed, it would tolerate no artificial closure. I had no idea about how to proceed and stopped working for a time. Eventually, I was able to formulate one mandate: I would end my reliance on appropriation and endeavour to make and use my own images. I wanted the Echo of my art to be silent long enough for a more satisfying dialogue between my private and public archives of image to emerge. I made a work to practice and announce my new resolve. *The Bakers' Showcase* consists

of a glass case that houses the remaining copies of *Four Notable Bakers*, a printing press that churns out other portraits of British bakers, and one large, new book. This book, centrally displayed, features as its cover a photograph of a woman inclined, in an attitude of prayer or production, over a large mound of raw dough, which, by way of its amenability to formation and growth, embodies potentiality. In spite of its promises, this image of ascendancy over the tiny Victorian bakers surprised me by its failure, as the worker both in and out of the picture remained paralyzed. The new book, its blank pages waiting expectantly for scenarios of freedom from a woman who had left the patriarchy behind, remained empty.

In considerations of strategies involving appropriation, one caveat recurs: the danger of being overtaken in what is essentially a struggle over power of speech. The appropriator in a sense inhabits the body of her subject, manipulating its mouth to articulate a critique of itself. This ventriloquism presents an identity of instability, a subject prone to denouncing itself, exposing itself, undoing itself. Effecting this personality disorder in the character of the socially unassailable requires a skilled touch—too light, and all appears normal; too heavy, and the presence of an ideologue is suspected. What's more dangerous, however, is being too right—conforming so closely to the host's shape and movement that something symbiotic develops: the perfect fit, a shared dependency. This becomes your niche, and you dwell, forever invisible, forever aggrieved, deep in the heart of your oppressor.

I can't admit to viewing my situation this graphically as I waited for the unproductive months to end, though I did have a sense of being bereft. Leaving the "father" behind was like leaving an acrimonious family. Now who was I supposed to argue with—myself?

During this hiatus, I rifled through my life searching for any means by which I could measure my own transformation. Finally, *Field Work*: a portfolio of ten photographs made from 35 mm, black and white negatives, taken when I was a student over twenty years ago. Perversely, this very explicit desire to use my own images is what lands me here, fidgeting in public, under persistent charges that I continue to steal my material, this time, not from the powerful but from the "oppressed and marginalized." Or, as various critics have

put it, I have “poached on Native culture,” “appropriated the pain of others,” “effected a second erasure of the Native presence,” and “used the stories of others without permission.”

What could lurk in these pictures that drives them to such pillage and plunder? First, we should note that they were taken by me of my friends and acquaintances. We are in our early twenties, playing around in diverse locations from the eastern seaboard to the west. We are in parks and on the shore. We are fishing and camping. Some of us wear headbands and moccasins. There is a tipi, a canoe. We are dancing to the music of Luddites everywhere, fending off modern technology with campfires and canvas tents. Equipment not visible in the pictures are books: *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, *Silent Spring*, *Zen and the Art of Archery*, *Black Elk Speaks*, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*—testaments to our belief in the destructiveness of Western progress and guidebooks to ways we might reject our poisonous patrimony. Through the 1960s and into the ’70s, there were varying degrees of commitment to this movement, from the establishment of rural communes to the organization of weekend acid trips. But as history has shown, most of us didn’t follow through on our big plans for change, in spite of the huge doses of rhetoric. We only played at it, and it is with real grief now that I think of our spent idealism and naive duplicity. These pictures are sad and embarrassing. When I dug them up, my first impulse was to deny or forget them. But disavowal seemed too drastic, and I decided to proceed, sifting through the images to salvage what I could. By salvage, I mean that I hoped to find something genuine amidst the folly of our youth.

Like most art, this is a private and personal project clothed for the chill of public exposure. My winter coat here, in *Field Work*, is the inclusion of titles taken from another work—the huge portfolio of Edward S. Curtis, called *The North American Indian*, which he began in 1901. Curtis was known to manipulate his subjects: having them shave a moustache, change to traditional clothes, re-enact customs of the past. Because of this, he is considered a romantic, an artist rather than an anthropologist, and his presence in my work provides ironic distance for me from the people in the photographs. His titles mis-fit my pictures and help me say: “We were foolish; now I’m smarter. They were guilty, but I am not,” my simple betrayal of old friends that will certainly reap its revenge someday.

But as a tactic, irony offers unreliable protection, prone to dropping away just when you need it most. Many viewers are blind to irony for their own earnest reasons, while others simply aren't familiar with its machinations. Without irony here, I am just a pathetic thing celebrating with my subjects our childish fantasies. More problematic, perhaps, is the fact that irony precludes sincerity and can mask an undisclosed ambivalence—its doubleness allowing one to have it both ways. How convincing is a critique that mocks its subjects while lovingly enlarging them? Is there something I am reluctant to give up? Is it possible, with respect to one's own history, to effect a true change of heart?

For me, these are the critical questions. It's not an issue of borrowing, or poaching, or appropriation, but a question of identifying, questioning, and re-ordering all the myth, fact, and fantasy that we are stuffed with. Like many others who were born here, I have absorbed a good dose of the elixir known as Canadian Culture and History. We have all heard the same stories, and we tend to imagine ourselves as wilderness experts, people who know about deep forests and clear waters. Never mind that most of us live in cities just a breath away from the Canada/US border, as far as we're concerned, the wild land that made our fortune also formed our soul. Our classrooms are crammed with pictures of trees and lakes. Our postcards and calendars show miles of mountains and moose. Our vacations are juggling acts of canoes and kayaks and skis and fishing rods. With a population equal to California's and an area of land second only to the USSR, there certainly is a lot of room to try out our equipment. But we go further. Every Canadian nationalist has an Inuit carving in the house. Every teacher hangs a Cape Dorset print in the office. We wear Haida bracelets and raise Kwakiutl poles on the plaza. We are the people of the North; we are the people of the land.

We have worked out some kind of deal for ourselves that makes this our romance, our rationalization for living in a difficult climate. This is our compensation for having no great cities, no world power, and no particular genius. We have carefully superimposed Aboriginal culture over our own to enhance our role as we rattle around on our big frozen stage, and our commitment to the part suffers no challenge. How can there be Native land claims when we are native ourselves? If our courts seem to stumble and stall in their attempts to resolve

these issues, they are easily matched in their dissembling ways by the citizens who hoard their little psychic packages.

So what is my truth here? As with feminism, my control of theory doesn't always coincide with the control of my emotions. If I say that mine is a project of relinquishment, can I live up to that claim? This is a serious hazard for me as I discover the extent of my entanglement. I grew up in BC, primarily in Prince Rupert—a site of confirmed human habitation going back 10,000 years. Today, the city's numbers include Tsimshian, Haida, and Kwakiutl people, and its harbour is home to the largest Native commercial fishing fleet in North America. As far as the rest of the population goes, it has always been a tough town with a thick frontier hide and not much taste for culture. The most significant art I saw there in my first twelve years was traditional and Native, and for me, it is irrevocably identified with that place. This isn't simply because of contiguity. I attribute it more to the aptness of its expression: the carving on poles, masks, and boxes that conjures the very sea and forest of that dark, particular landscape. The work has been deeply collected for over a hundred years and can be found in museums all over the world. It is strange to walk into the Museum of Natural History in New York and be catapulted back to my sad, soggy childhood home by the sight of one small, steamed and bent cedar box. This experience, a gift for a Proust or a Bachelard, is, for me, the source of conflict and confusion. First, because of the museum and its retinue of Indian agents, dealers, and anthropologists who carted the stuff away by the crateload, leaving little in exchange. And then, by the notion of home, which is disputed land even yet in a province with no treaties. Politically, I can't call it my home, but emotionally, I know no other.

In a work called *Child's Sweater*, I timidly suggest we share it. The featured object in the piece is a very small sweater knitted with a pattern made from several colours of undyed wool. The sweater is held aloft in the beak of a long, black bird's head in front of a length of woven fabric. The weaving only momentarily mimes traditional cedar bark fabric before devolving into a construction of paper and string. The bird also lies. Where we expect to find a ceremonial mask, we confront instead a cardboard mock-up of a heron skull, an object very different from the artifact it claims to represent. Surely the sweater must be real—at least it's not made of paper. But is it a



real Cowichan sweater? This fact is harder to establish because of the terms of its manufacture. A Cowichan sweater is easy to copy, and certainly there is a rampant industry of knock-offs from home and abroad that competes for space in the overstuffed tourist shops of airports and resort towns. In a bid to protect their industry, the Cowichan sought and won an injunction forbidding the use of their name by any of these impostors. In terms of ownership of cultural property, then, here is one thing that is confirmed. But, ironically, copyright has been conferred on the least pure image. This little jacket represents an authentic hybrid—the issue of Scottish and Salish women working together in the Cowichan Valley in 1920. If we look closely, we can see where the technique of knitting Fair Isle patterns has wed the design of the Salish.

In another work, *Siberian Husky*, Provenance gives way to her siblings, Collection and Display. This work comes from a visit to the British Museum, where I saw an exhibition of Inuit artifacts collected by a British aristocrat in 1887. As evidenced in his journal, Hugh Lowther (1847–1944), the fifth Earl of Lonsdale, was an adventurer of not-too-delicate moral and aesthetic sensibilities. Like many things in museums, the beauty of his collection is in direct inverse proportion to the ugliness of its acquisition, and as a viewer, I find my schooling in the appreciation of art and history on a collision course with my schooling in ethics and morality. Ostensibly set up to display the gut parkas of the museum, my installation, in fact, becomes full of images of other things: our dubious heroes and explorers; our persistent love of adventure; and our husbanded exoticism. The parkas themselves sink back, obscured by waves of context and reference. If any culture is represented here, it can only be the dreams, shadows, fantasies, and disguises of my own.

My culture now, in its contemporary body, is stirring in its sleep. It is desperately uncomfortable and needs to shift position if not totally roll over, ending its 300-year dream of superiority. We can't flatter ourselves by imagining that this accommodation is voluntary; it comes about only through the efforts of Native activists who have finally gained a purchase on power. We are slow in our movement though, and I wonder why. Is it for fear of losing? Will we lose the right to think of ourselves as brave and just? Will the pioneer in the family become an embarrassment? Will our European names mark

us as racists? If we open up everything, we stand to lose our oldest stories, so it's tempting to leave history closed. Or, preempt a painful, slow rewriting by opening it while not looking closely. We simply concede that the worst is true and go about changing the labels under the portraits to read **EVIL EXPLOITER** instead of **BRAVE EXPLORER**. There are lots of volunteers for this job. It's another way to shift the blame, leaving out the details of our own subtle and devious ways. Not surprisingly, I find myself thinking about the British artist Victor Burgin these days, remembering his work of the early '80s dealing with the politics of representation, particularly the representation of women. He said he was not doing feminist work but seeking the counterpoint to women's issues in the sphere of the masculine, exploring the position of "those who find themselves male without knowing quite what to do with it." With some substitution in words, I could take his agenda to be my own and would do so happily if I didn't remember my suspicions concerning his project. Perhaps we invest too dearly in our positions and view all who come near as encroachers instead of collaborators. In any case, I view his work with more sympathy now, having experienced for myself the difficulty of embodying the binary—when the Victorian men of my bread book have become both my oppressors and my grandfathers.

I don't know if I can make honest work while scrutinizing my own ingrained beliefs. In each work, I alternate between defending and attacking myself; my moral resolve lurches from self-flagellation to arrogance; my voice slides from high-pitched pleading to the drone of indignation. It's not a pretty sight. It makes some people uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable. But all things considered, it feels like the right thing to do, and I'm resigned to suffer the political incorrectness inherent in my choice. It may have been bad conscience that started me and Canada on our journey of change, but it will take a richer fuel than guilt if we're going to make it in the long run.

February 20, 1864

Published in French and English in *Pour la suite du Monde : cahier : propos et projets*, eds. Gilles Godmer and Réal Lussier, the catalogue for an exhibition at Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, May 26–October 11, 1992. The essay's French title was "le 20 février"

On the morning of February 20, 1864, US Federal forces gathered at Lake City, Florida, to obtain recruits and to force the allegiance of that state to the Union. Local Confederate troops, committed to the secession of the Southern states, engaged the Union men in a day-long battle at Olustee Field and succeeded, by nightfall, in driving them back, ending the Union drive south. Every year, on the anniversary of the conflict, 10,000 people descend on the site to take their vicarious pleasure from the victory. Half of them come in period dress. There are medics, merchants, and drummer boys; there are several thousand Confederate infantrymen, scores of freelance rebels, a small Union contingent looking nervous and outnumbered; there are cannons and horses and old-fashioned tents. For two days they go about their nineteenth-century business, preparing for the afternoon when they hurl themselves with historic passion into a replay of the great battle.

For two hours, guided by an amplified play-by-play, cheering spectators in bleachers follow the exchange of choreographed advances and bullet-free volleys. Mounted officers drive the men forward. Fallen warriors are hurried away on stretchers after each remote-controlled cannon blast. Finally, the bluecoats are routed and run away through the palm-tree forest. Exhausted weekend soldiers, their aggression spent, exchange uniforms for street clothes and everyone returns home charged with rebel righteousness for another year.

As Civil War re-enactment goes, Olustee is big but not the biggest, and authentic but not the truest, having degenerated in recent years into something of a family affair. In addition to being blighted by the admission of women and children to the camps, Olustee has the reputation of attracting all kinds of non-Civil War types. I saw a couple of Davy Crocketts, some Wells Fargo riders, cowboys, and American Revolutionaries. After six months of photographing Civil War events, my attitude to these get-ups was somewhat jaded, aided no doubt by regular and prolonged exposure to American culture via television and film. After the first burst of incredulity at seeing screen characters live and in the flesh, it was all becoming flat the way food with a distinct flavour is reduced to mere material in the mouth if your portion is too large.

I was unfazed by the most outlandish outfits, certainly a bad attitude for an observer, indicating a kind of resignation. In the dense crowds at Olustee, I had become exhausted with the effort of extracting specific images from the confusion. I was reduced to seeing all signs as leading to one referent; “these are all just Americans,” I decided.

In this state of fatigue, as I was leaving, I saw two people standing with a Mountain Man at a campfire. They looked like relatives in crowd of strangers: a man and a woman in long, unfitted coats made from blankets. Hers was red with black bands running horizontally at the hem. His was white with red bands. The coats had big collars that became V-shaped hoods at the back. The man wore a knitted hat that cocked over at the top and dangled a pom-pom on a string. He had a wide sash made from many colours of wool. They both had high deerskin boots with fringe. They reminded me of something I couldn't locate and, assuming they were just another television image gone AWOL, I didn't bother with them.

I finished the Civil War and cleared its image out of the studio, but the people in blanket coats didn't leave. They stayed in my mind as figures with no background. I couldn't remember where I'd seen them. Was it at the dogsled races in Algonquin Park or was it just a fashion thing glimpsed at some restaurant or concert? Eventually I found the coats, on other people in different places: Indiana, Missouri, Winnipeg, Thunder Bay. And I found their milieu: various militia, voyageurs, coureurs des bois, Highlanders, maids and swains, trappers and traders.

I began photographing these people because I like how transparent they are. Their motives aren't mysterious. They have devised a simple pretence for recreation and adventure. They entertain their fantasies with constraint on designated weekends in parks well supplied with portajohns. They are not duplicitous; most of them don't assume that a costume is the same as a persona. In fact, their efforts lead more toward expression than concealment. Always, re-enactors galvanize their hobby around dramatic, historic events. With a story of epic proportions provided, the participants are free to concentrate their attention on material details like clothing and equipment. Invariably, this concoction of the rhetorical and the literal serves to stimulate emotional response, sometimes to an extreme degree.

At the Civil War events I could see grief but I couldn't feel it. One night in a Confederate camp I heard men discussing their historic defeat and surrender which were to be re-enacted in battle the next day. Some became distraught to the point of tears and they argued about the necessity of being faithful to history even in their games. I heard bitter sobs coming from the camp throughout the night and learned in the morning that the dissenting regiment had actually decamped, refusing to have anything to do with the reiteration of the humiliation of their forefathers.

This project is different, I feel grief but I can't locate its cause. All the participants are so jolly. They pump their bagpipes and sing the songs of the voyageur and show us how to light a fire without matches. There are birchbark canoes and beautiful, old historic buildings. But the more I see, the sadder I feel. Obviously, there is melancholy in considerations of the past; acknowledgement of opportunities missed, idylls destroyed. And there's something poignant about adults playing dress-up as children do. But it's something else that makes me uncomfortable.

It reminds me of the times when I sense that at my own gestures are a mimicry of my parents' gestures—the way I walk or talk or laugh. When a simple movement of my hand can stun me with the proof that my father and mother occupy me in some unavoidable way. The feelings that accompany this experience are disturbing, a mixture of awe and disgust. Ultimately, I feel enfeebled by my physical tautology and anxious about its implications beyond the corporeal. So I'm puzzled by people who welcome this condition, and seek to become their ancestors.

Re-enactors are strange to me because they accept so readily the conflation of the genetic, the social, and the historic. They link the past to the present with such suffocating logic that you can't tell if they're looking forward or backward in time. They are devoted to repetition, meeting week after week for their games of identity. But with every rerun something seeps away. I've been looking for history in places where it has been emptied out. The people and all their paraphernalia are more than props. What happens if I consider that the costumes, the buildings, the gear, and all the retold tales are really part of an elaborate ruse? Or that the whole living history movement

FEBRUARY 20, 1864

is itself a kind of social persona? I get a little closer to the source of my discomfort, but I'm still left wondering what anxious psyche this stratagem is meant to conceal and whether or not it is confined to provincial parks and past events.



House Plant

Written for the exhibition *Liz Magor* at Susan Hobbs Gallery,
April 29–June 5, 1993

Susan Hobbs

Artist's Statement

House Plant 1993 by Liz Magor

House Plant is situated within the body of work that began with Field Work 1989 and is closely aligned with Siberian Husky 1990 and Boas and Others 1991.

This body of work concerns itself with images of history and culture and each work examines ways in which these images are manipulated to construct and adapt individual identity.

Field Work is a portfolio of photographs of counter-culture youth of the 1960's. The ethos of this generation included the rejection of the values of Western culture in favour of the pre-modern concepts found in Eastern religions, agrarian or pioneer eras and aboriginal cultures. In the photographs the superimposition of native imagery and customs over the Western (European) identity of the subjects is revealed through the titles of the pictures which subtly mis-fit their imagery. A kind of unglueing of the parts of the image takes place showing a gap between authenticity and artifice. The romantic desire of the subjects to remake themselves in the image of the Indian is in the end nothing more than naive folly.

In Siberian Husky this gap is approached from a different angle with a sculpture of a dog as the central image which vacillates between the real and the romantic; the tough working dog of the north becomes sweet and benign, a large toy. And the parkas, like the dog, removed from their context of utility become artifacts, illusions of our romantic ideas of the north.

Boas and Others is a photographic work extending the concerns of Field Work. Thirteen men of European ancestry have, for various reasons outfitted themselves in Inuit-style clothing, varying greatly in the aptness of their appearance. The work operates simply on the vicissitudes of resemblance - all the men are dressed and posed in the same fashion - but some seem more comfortable in their hybrid identity; less costumed, more natural. It is this question of adaptation that generated the idea for House Plant.

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HOUSE PLANT

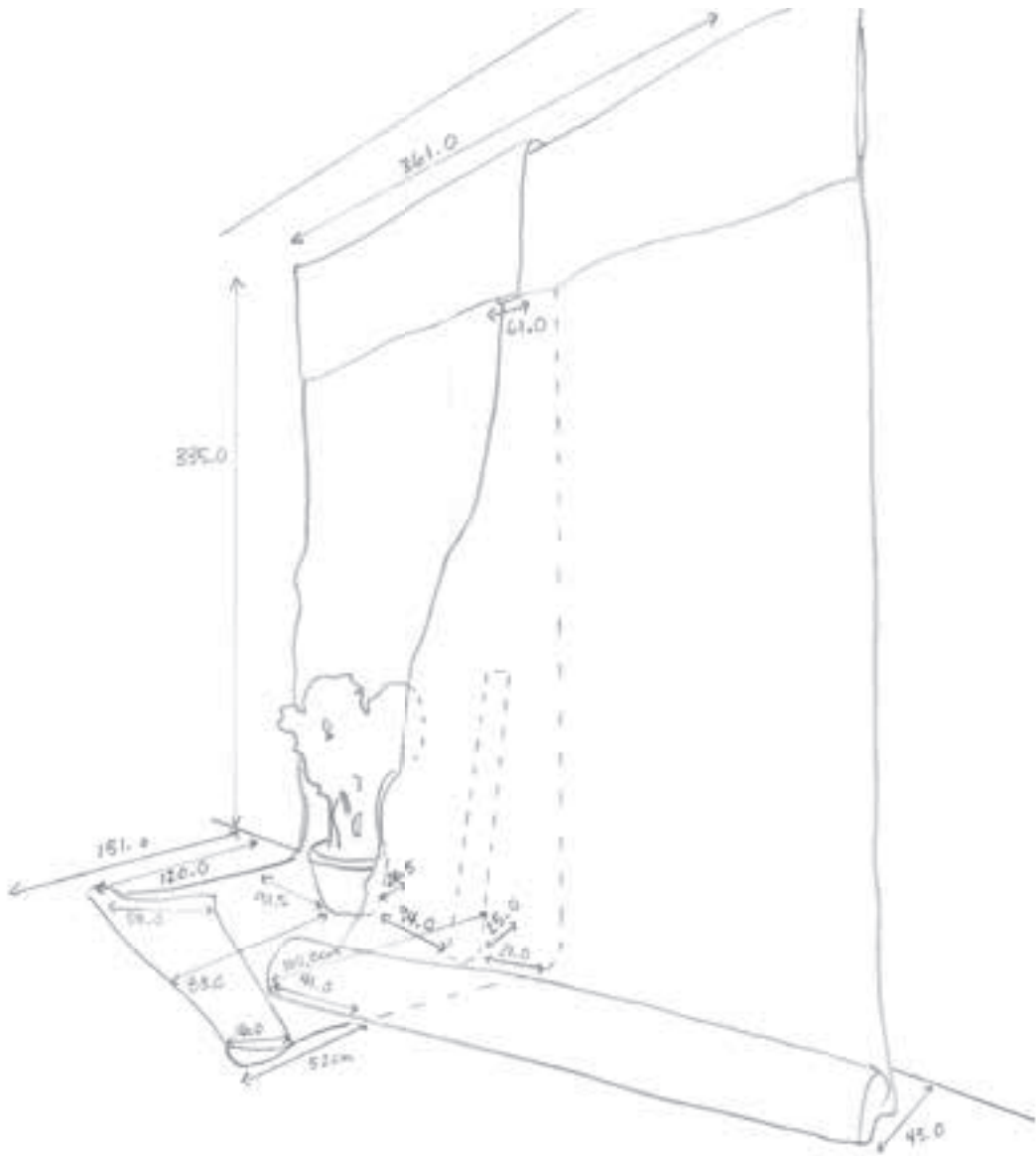
Artist's Statement
House Plant 1993 by Liz Magor

page two

Although House Plant is concerned with the same issues as these earlier works: how do we know and define authenticity? what degree of adaptation is necessary for something to be "produced naturally"? I wanted the sculpture to function in a more direct way; to be less historically or culturally specific than previous works, to operate more as phenomenon than sign. Somewhat the way the dog works in Siberian Husky. Before we identify the dog's meaning or significance in the work we are fascinated by its simple presence and the perceived possibility that it will wake up and become "real". I am interested in how this operation involves the viewer in the construction of reality an action that is parallel to the subject or content of the work.

In rough terms the image for this work came from a convergence of two things: a jade plant in my house that is starved for light and leans at a 30 degree angle toward the window; and a winter train trip from Toronto to Vancouver that seemed principally to be a journey over bright snow through a dark night. I thought of a situation that fails to provide a condition essential for survival, in this case light. At first I thought the plant would be an image of failure to produce chlorophyll, but it emerged to seem alive, vigorous even, on its own terms. Of the 13 tropicals in a cold land (Boas and Others) I thought the white jade tree would be the botanical equivalent of a pathetic adventurer like John Hoet, instead it seems acclimatized to its hard situation, a new native, naturally produced.

The relationship of House Plant to Provincial Sideboard 1993 shown at the same time at Susan Hobbs is as thesis and anti-thesis. While House Plant operates phenomenologically, Provincial Sideboard is semiotic, citing specific events and objects. Also where House Plant presents a successful adaptation against the odds, the settlers in Provincial Sideboard stand by helplessly while their house burns. The beaver stands aghast at the scene on a charred remnant. It seems they can't survive here. House Plant stands in contradiction to their situation. In a way I regard it as an update of their story.



Installation Diagram

House Plant 1993 by Liz Magor
felt, silicone rubber, fluorescent light
installed dimensions:
335.0 x 361.0 x 151.0 cm





Maple Leaf Confectionery

Published in *American Visions / Visiones de las Americas: Artistic and Cultural Identity in the Western Hemisphere*, eds. Mary Jane Jacob, Noreen Tomassi, and Ivo Mesquita (New York: ACA Books and Art International, 1994). It was based on a presentation at “Artistic and Cultural Identity in Latin America,” a conference convened by Arts International in collaboration with Memorial da América Latina, September 23–25, 1991, to coincide with the opening of the 1991 São Paulo Bienal

In Toronto, on the street where I live, ninety-five per cent of the shops are owned by people who have English as a second language. The anomaly, the 5 per cent, stands between Phuong Video Store and the Venezia Portuguese Bakery. It's a little convenience store, opened by Irish Canadians in 1910 and called, patriotically enough, the Maple Leaf Confectionary. Now it's run by Kaye, the last in the family, a snaggle-toothed crone who shuffles around behind her Victorian display cases straightening the little piles of candy and smokes and hoping to snag a hapless customer into a bit of gab and gossip. Mostly she lurks in vain. Due to the combined effect of meagre stock and the heavy scent of cat shit, her store stays quite empty of customers. Even I don't go there, which is strange since I like to gab and gossip and I share Kaye's Irish heritage. But when I go out for milk I walk right past her store going an extra block to the Korean store on the corner.

To explain why this is so, I have to resort to a dichotomy, though the parts are unequal in that one side is much easier to address.

The easy part to say is that I want the Korean to feel welcome in my neighbourhood and I want to feel welcome in his store. I realize the demographics around me are changing and I think that if I shop where everyone else shops I can adjust my sense of identity incrementally as these changes occur. This is enlightened self-interest; establishing good relations for the future and ensuring that I can continue to live in Toronto with psychic comfort in spite of the fact that I am not surrounded by my own culture. I am encouraged in my approach. Not only does it enjoy the moral support of my peers and the official support of our government, but it inherently contains enough unknowns to appear exciting and desirable. In fact, sometimes, waiting for a streetcar in a typical Toronto crowd that includes every race and creed known in the world, I am moved to a Benetton-like fervour in thinking of the whole thing as a great adventure, a social experiment without precedent.

But of course I can afford to be generous. I was born in Canada and so was my father and so was his. So was my mother and hers and hers. I have privilege in Canada that I don't even have to think about to claim. Privilege that extends beyond the economic to the physical, material place. I know the islands and waterways of the West Coast. I know the farms of the Ottawa Valley and the towns in the foothills

of the Rockies. I can imagine moving to almost any small town in Canada and being welcome. I can imagine living in a forest or on the edge of a lake and surviving. I may find myself in a minority in downtown Toronto, but my proprietary rights outside the city are long established. This sense of possessing the body of Canada has been part of the Euro-Canadian identity since Charles II gave Rupert's Land to British fur merchants (The Company of Adventurers) in 1670. This is the other side of the Canadian immigration coin. Kaye and I are both progeny of immigrants, though we've not been inclined to acknowledge that until recently. We would more likely describe ourselves as the descendants of settlers or pioneers, and it is this precise heritage that I'm unable to celebrate with her and which keeps me out of her store. Kaye has no problem with the history she's been taught while I have my doubts.

From the first Canadian Immigration Act in 1869 until the Second World War, immigrants to Canada paid little attention to the fact that there were people here before them. Many immigrants came under the Homestead Act, taking free land in return for developing it. They saw no culture above theirs and recognized no inhabitants on the land they turned into farms and towns. Theirs is a well-known story, one told throughout all the Americas. But Canada is still writing this story and she has tales to tell that are peculiar to herself, that concern how she imagines herself and how she describes herself to others.

Canadians imagine themselves as wilderness experts, people who know about deep forests and clear waters. Never mind that most of us live on a thin line of cities stretching from the Pacific to the Atlantic just a breath away from the Canada/US border. As far as we're concerned, the land that made our fortune also formed our soul. Our classrooms are crammed with paintings of trees and lakes. Our postcards and calendars show miles of mountains and moose. Our vacations are juggling acts of canoes and kayaks and skis and fishing rods. With a population equal to California's and an area of land just shy of the former Soviet Union's, there certainly is a lot of room for trying out our equipment. But we go further. Every Canadian nationalist has an Inuit carving in the house. Every clerk has a Cape Dorset print on the wall. We wear Haida earrings and bracelets and the City Hall raises Kwakiutl poles on the plaza. Tourists flock to our museums to see the Indian artifacts. We are people of the

North. We are people of the land.

We have worked out some sort of deal for ourselves that makes this our romance, our rationalization for living in a difficult climate. This is our compensation for having no great cities, no world power, and no particular genius. We have carefully superimposed Aboriginal culture over our own to enhance our *rôle* as we rattle around on our big, frozen stage and our commitment to the part suffers no challenge. How can there be Native land claims when we are native ourselves? We have it both ways; we are here by royal decree and by Indigenous design ironically fashioning ourselves into the only real noble savage there ever was.

But now the act is over. These days we feel a psychic shudder from sea to shining sea as the First Nations gain a purchase on power claiming not only their lands and a right to self-government but also the return of all myths, stories, images, histories, and language that have been sucked into the usurper's maw.

This makes us afraid. What if it happens that our big advantage, our edge over native and newcomer alike, our trove of Canadian Culture and History turns out to be nothing but a box of forgeries, frauds, and impostors? We are afraid that we'll lose the right to think of ourselves as brave and just, that the pioneer in the family will become an embarrassment, that our European names will translate as racist.

Another thing that we had imagined is that all racists live elsewhere, like in the United States. It's harder for us to think of ourselves in these terms than it is not to think of ourselves at all. We would rather erase our own past than claim it, so it's tempting to leave history closed by simply conceding that the worst is true. We merely change the labels under the portraits to read "Evil Exploiter" instead of "Brave Explorer," leaving out the details of our own subtle and devious ways.

But our lies *are* our stories and much more interesting than Victorian tales of good and bad. There are tales to tell about how comfortable we became in our ill-fitting costumes; how we thought no one could see through our romantic personae; how we cobbled together our scripts from movies and books and tall tales. I want to look into the chest and pull out the props, check out the shabby disguises, hold the

lump of pyrite in my hand. And as I root around, I think I will be ashamed and embarrassed, but those feelings are already out of the box and will not be stuffed back in. Maybe I'll find some things that don't sound so hollow when I shake them and I'll put them aside. It's like salvaging after a fire. If there's anything substantial in the end I might call it a place; a place for me to be in Canada between the First People and the new Canadians, and I'll be very glad to have it even if it's not much grander than the Maple Leaf Confectionery on Ossington Avenue.





White House Paint

Published in *Real Fictions: Four Canadian Artists*,
ed. Linda Michael, the catalogue for an exhibition
at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia,
September 1–December 1, 1996

In 1996 Ralph Lauren issued a line of house paint including these shades of white:

Aspen White
Pocket Watch White
Avalanche
Polo Mallet White
Breakwater White
Poncho White
Candelabra White
Portico White
Country Stove White
Resort White
Design Studio White
River Rapids
Dover Cliffs
Riviera Terrace
Dune White
Roadster White
Edwardian Linen
Sail White
Flour Sack White
Sailor's Knot
Journal White
Sneaker White
Killington Traverse
Snowdrift
Montauk Driftwood
Tennis Court White
Petticoat White
Tackroom White
Picket Fence White
Tuxedo Shirt

Lauren's initiative proves that it is no longer the prerogative of academics to ponder the intricacies of the relationship between language and experience. He is banking on the idea that the contemporary consumer operates like some weird progeny of a Barthes/Bachelard coupling, adept at mixing semiotics with subjectivity and dependent on the virtual worlds thus created for a defining notion of self.

White: the ground zero of colour. House: a container, not the contained. Paint: not even an object.

Imagine the colours being mixed. A bucket of basic white stung by an intense drop of experience. Choose between nature, history, and class. Then coat the walls, clothe them with the idea of colour. Drape the sheet-rock in essence-of-world so that you are surrounded by, enveloped within, a phantom scene existing in the space between the wall and the paint. Picture a room painted Flour Sack White. A barn, big timbers, wide planks, weathered wood. Some chickens, some straw, a sweet smell. There, behind the couch, just under the skin: sub-neutral, sub-visual, subliminal.

For artists, the reign of market metaphysics is both a delight and a dilemma. The transgression of boundaries, the mixing of genres, the overlap of the imagined with the real; these have been art's stock-in-trade for several generations. To find it all in operation in the general population, therefore, demands a repositioning of the artist's role in the interest of avoiding redundancy. The shift might be from object to subject. Consider the found object: an artless thing emptied of meaning and filled with new intent. Consider the found subject: sliding soul emptied of history and filled with new memories.

A log cabin is a perfect system. The clearing of the site and the delivery of material are simultaneous as the forest makes and makes way for the house. In its construction there is no need for mills, markets, or other people, and the neat stacking of one log upon the other can double as a graph charting the mounting independence of the builder. In earlier times, this independence was measured as distance not from other people but from other systems, and escape from the rigours of class. The log cabin is the rudimentary unit of a growing settlement, a bulwark against the wilderness, a house where the new social order begins.

Today's cabin is different. It is solitary, positioning other people as the threat and the wilderness as solace. Maybe our city neighbours are exceeding the simple nuisance they once were, escalating into dangerous forms of fauna. Perhaps the ordinary grind wears us into muteness. Whatever the cause, the instinct to pull into the shell is strong. Introversion seeks its form. The cabin waits. Given the urge,

it's surprising that the country isn't dotted from coast to coast with these little forts. Perhaps it's the distilled version of solitude that daunts us. Only the over-confident are driven to try it. For the rest of us, the Cabin in the Snow is best kept as an idea. A place where our true self resides knowing it has no real home in the world.

There was a time when our neighbours were not life-threatening. This was in 1968 for a few months, at least for a summer of love and peace. The photographs in *Field Work* were taken in the late '60s as a side-line to a student ambition to capture a "pivotal moment." This term was taken to mean the signifying image at the instant of change for the subject. A car crash, for example, or an emotional collapse, a leaping animal, a natural disaster. Perforce, this project entailed a lot of waiting and the photographs taken between events were by definition uneventful. The *Field Work* pictures were ordinary in their own time by virtue of their simple availability. This was a whole generation staging for the next leg in a journey, perhaps collectively postponing our own pivotal moment: the transforming event that would render us adult. We stalled. We sensed that there was something in ourselves that was undernourished by our own culture with its ethos of get and gain. Behaving as though we had been abducted at birth, we sought our true heritage by repositioning ourselves, effecting a manipulation of time and identity through accessories and attitude. We mimed a life we remembered but hadn't lived. Of course, from here, these pictures look impossible: sincerity undone by artifice. But look again, these kids are pioneers in the art of persona.

A contemporary practice of persona, known as living history, attracts thousands of participants to the re-enactment of particular historic periods and events. Here is the resurrection of the fur trade era in North America, 1640–1760; les Habitants, Coureurs des bois, Highlanders, Mohicans, Iroquois scouts, Redcoats, and Colonists: The Forces of Wolfe and Montcalm.

As with the log cabin, this pageant presents a revised memory with a bias toward singularity and individuality. For re-enactors, kinship is matter of choice, not legacy. The expression of difference requires that the large orders be splintered into small units by way of signifying accoutrements: tartans, colours, badges of regiment, or the cut of a coat. All become markers for a clan of three, a tribe of two. Traditional

life is evoked but its forms of social collectivity have been melted down and turned into souvenirs. As mementos, the paraphernalia of re-enactment are cues for repetition, creating a cycle that turns feeling into sentiment and history into instruction.

Render it domestic. Bring the world home in bits and pieces, objects from the lands we lay claim to. With diplomatic grace our belongings report to us the new from afar, filling us in, making us large. And we move. Not just from self to self but from place to place, trailing our stuff behind us. A large, one-bedroom apartment. Another variable in the identity knot. We could call this the “container variable,” filled with the “furnishing variables.” All the hard things we can’t shake off. Appurtenances. A collection of pieces conspiring to make a whole.

Animals presage earthquakes by several days. Cattle grow restless, birds fall silent, pets go missing. They sense the infant seismic stirrings that will mature into catastrophe. Collapse. Something is always slipping while our lives sit balanced on the edge. Put together a world that holds, the way it used to be. A cup is missing its saucer. Put this one with this. If that works, try a bolder move: this couch with these drapes, this body with that time. Now change your father, become your ancestor, find the family you lost, the purpose you missed.

Language has changed places with experience, promising lives that seem limitless. In spite of the vague terms, we fall on the offer like weary travelers who have failed to fit the map on the terrain. Destination is not the point. We want a world inside of a world where we feel welcome and safe. Under these conditions, Ralph Lauren’s products are a good deal. We can redecorate whenever we feel uncomfortable. Paint and repaint. And arrive and arrive and arrive.



Messenger

Published in a pamphlet produced for the installation of
Messenger, commissioned by the Toronto Sculpture Garden,
October 16, 1996–April 15, 1997

This cabin was erected in the Sculpture Garden in the fall of 1996 for a six-month tenure. A firm specializing in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century wooden buildings found it in Northern Ontario under a layer of aluminum siding, and unstacked, removed, and rebuilt it in Toronto. Now, freshly chinked, roof knocked right with sill logs firmly planted on its new plot, the cabin holds its ground so surely it seems impossible it hasn't always been here: a relic from muddy York, the first building of the town, calling down others as upstarts and interlopers. St. James's Cathedral across the street, in spite of its venerable two hundred years, looks like a transplant, an import, next to the small, indigenous hut.

And passersby, far from surprised at its sudden appearance, greet the little place with all the warmth of travellers returning home after a long and arduous journey. In a kind of reunion, they manufacture a memory from salvaged materials and assemble a story from bits and pieces otherwise lost to the unnamings of time.



Many contemporary museums invite visitors to take a stroll down the streets of long-vanished villages and towns and to peek into the still life of re-created rooms: the blacksmith's shop; the doctor's office, or the general store. Without hesitation, we spirit ourselves into each mise-en-scène, becoming, for a moment, its natural inhabitant, resuscitating the contents with our imaginary ownership. Never has material seemed so pertinent, so relevant. Like long-lost belongings, these foreign objects insinuate themselves into our personal remembrances. Each consoling object slides with perfect fit into the place that anticipates it. And so it is with the cabin as visitors approach, cupping their hands around their eyes to look in the windows.

They know what to expect. Cabins are part of our legacy and tell a familiar story of North American values: a tale of self-sufficiency, personal sovereignty, and solitude. The narrow cot, lone chair, the cup and bowl confirm a solitary inhabitant. The snowshoes, chainsaw, and wood stove indicate a rustic, self-reliant character. Even the construction of the cabin itself, the neat stacking of log upon log, provides a tangle record of the builder's mounting autonomy: a measure of distance from the complications of society and bureaucratic systems. For the pioneer settler, distance from others was not the object. The early cabin was the rudimentary unit of a growing settlement, the

first shelter in the wilderness. It was not sufficient on its own to keep the unknown at bay and a string of huts along a dirt trail provided enhanced protection from danger. Finding solace in numbers, the line became a cluster, then a village, finally a city. Tenure in the new world was secured by an encrustation of individual dwellings whose inhabitants managed a notion of privacy within the structures of community.

Today's cabin works the other way round: its value increases with its distance from others and our neighbours seem to offer more disturbance than solace. Along with other intrusions, they have to be kept out. The frontier has shifted and, in an exaggerated version of pioneer spirit, we assume a defensive position under the guise of autonomy. With the threat of invasion seeping through our walls, we dream of solid enclosures. Turning inward for comfort, we form a carapace to shield our soft centre.

In response, the cabin contains all the necessities for survival in a world construed as hazardous and full of the nefarious, obfuscating intentions of others. Ammunition boxes share storage space with basic supplies such as flour and sugar. A battle axe from the brave hearts of Scotland, pineapple hand grenades, a Teutonic sallet with full visor, camouflage uniforms from the Vietnam War, helmets, medieval gauntlets, studded arm braces, and a computer have been assembled by the cabin's absent inhabitant. Travelling in reverse, in a humour of hostility and distrust, this new outsider careens through the faux towns of museums and movie sets, pilfering a pan-historical arsenal of personal protection. Though packed into one room, his stock pile doesn't cleave to one timeline but is held together in a warp of warrior culture. We go along with this hyperbole as a true-to-life fiction, agreeing that what we see is simultaneously impossible and hyper-real. Besides, we are predisposed to accept this knot of anachronisms because the old cabin in the heart of a contemporary city has already begun the collapse of time and space.

As in many tales of little huts and solitary dwellers, here too is a strange companion who can work the uncanny. A dog lies on the bed, thin and white, his frail back turned towards us. The cabin shields his tender exposed form and reminds us of the possibility of a protecting presence and a safe nest. Sweet domesticity. The dog is where we



want to be: safely inside. Only on closer inspection do we notice his disturbing incompleteness. The normally appealing alter-ego is strangely alien. No eyes, no fur, no movement or any promise of such. He remains oblivious to scrutiny, a plaster cipher offering no detail. Under the terms of verisimilitude this mannequin threatens to throw the game. Its intransigence sends a quiver of doubt back over everything in the room. Have we become unwitting participants in a game, a contrived structure with its own rules and logic where some players operate on different terms than others? Each bag and box—is it real or is it a prop?

The reflection on the glass thickens as the windows rescind their offer of transparency. Momentarily the timbers of the cabin lose their density as we entertain the notion that they too may be artifice, a mean contrivance intended to confuse.

We are standing on the porch or under the dripping eaves, locked out. We rattle the door, and give it a yank, return to the side window and scan the room from front to back. We won't give this place up. The way back in is to revise the description of what we have seen. Perhaps we'll overlook the dog, excise him from the text. Or we can render him complete and enlist him as our collaborator on the inside. In either case, we retell a story of an original home and reproduce ourselves as its natural occupant. Introversion seeks its form. On the city street, a cabin waits. A shell, a bunker. A full redoubt.





Military Through the Ages

A statement that accompanied a portfolio of ten photographs
published by Canadian Photographic Portfolio Society, 1996

The photographs in this portfolio were taken in March 1993, at an event held annually near Williamsburg, Virginia. Contrived as an ancestral tree of soldiery, this “Military through the Ages” arranges itself in chronological camps along a park path. All the participants are hobbyists interested in military history. They vary in the degree of irony they bring to their sport but most of them regard the public events as highlights of the year. They leave work early on Friday with their friends and head out for a weekend of war.

Saturday morning bristles with metal as three hundred men gear up and muster to the defence of their historical patch. By the afternoon they are ready, convened as clan, tribe, unit, and regiment, to take a turn at tactical demonstration. Some groups are lucky enough to have an enemy in attendance and their performance is a rattling display of ancient animosity. Many, however, are lacking their historical adversary and must take to the field as virtual shadow-boxers. These foeless warriors are especially poignant and reveal a fundamental pitfall for all re-enactors: the unavoidable substitutions and omissions that frustrate the struggle for authenticity. Great pains are taken with detail. But for all the attention, it is detail that ultimately undoes the illusion. Some things about the body itself are either overlooked or unchangeable—the softness; the overweight; the white, straight teeth; the intact limbs and organs. Not that we want our friends maimed or punctured but we came to see history and what is the history of soldiers if not one of deprivation and physical sacrifice? Of course it’s not surprising that personal annihilation is the omission no one is sorry to make. There is some faking of death with squirt bags of blood but no one strives for the authentic black nightmare as he does for the genuine cap and gun. And the tonic of camaraderie is flattened by reminders of the ungalant trials a real soldier might endure: maggots; shrapnel wounds caused by flying bits of bone and tooth from one’s neighbour in the rank; diarrhea.

No, re-enactment is not a test of the body with its soft centre and limited lifespan. These are hearty men and they want to stay that way. Nor will they tolerate decay outside of themselves. Of hundreds of thousands of infantry-rank red jackets produced for Wellington’s army during the Napoleonic Wars, fewer than a dozen remain extant. There is no such casualty rate for the resissued paraphernalia of the 1990s. Rust can’t bloom on these oiled, metal thighs and moths won’t

drill into camphored woollens. This gear is archival from the first day, protected from its own inherent vice, conserved as a private museum that will outlive its curator.

Taken together the components of a uniform provide a protective exoskeleton for a tender organism. It's not just the intransigence of metal armour but the enduring assurance of affiliation offered by bits of braid and baize that allow the player to toy with his vulnerability. He jogs to his mock encounter hoping for a small scare, just enough desperation to free the adrenaline—high octane for the life force. The beauty of re-enactment is that time has lost its power. Each man emerges from every conflict virtually younger. History serves to render him acutely alive and intact. Once again he is not the headless corpse, the disembowelled trunk, the fly-blown cadaver. He lives to fight another day. This is a celebration of security. A ritual of conservation. A game of loss and restoration that can't be repeated too many times.



Blue Students

Published in Spanish and English in *inSITE97: Private Time in Public Space: San Diego, Tijuana*, ed. Sally Yard, the catalogue for an exhibition that extended from Tijuana, Mexico, to San Diego, California, September 26–November 30, 1997. The essay's Spanish title was “Alumnos en azul”



Blue Students began when I set up studios at the School of Creative and Performing Arts in San Diego and the Preparatoria Federal Lázaro Cárdenas in Tijuana and invited senior students to pose for my camera with their most steady and level gaze.

One by one they came to sit, and as I framed each young face in the viewfinder I was stunned by the potential I saw there, as though the reserve of humour, invention, and compassion was enormous and imminent. Affected by their promise I treated each portrait equally and made the best negative possible. My plan was to set the pictures on a course that approximates a life while confining it to the terms governing photography. Unlike life, the terms of photography are simple: light is everything.

To print the pictures, I made frames that pressed each negative against a sheet of paper coated with iron salts. Daylight would convert the exposed salts, producing a blue positive image. I wanted a perfect place for every face and situated them around San Diego and Tijuana. The indirect light of hallways and stairwells would make the best exposures, but when these were full I had to locate pictures in places that were too dark or too bright, like basements and windows. As I tore back the black mask on the portraits in these bad situations I apologized to the subjects, the camera, the lab technicians, and to the god of photography for this abuse of light-sensitive material. It was like throwing away immeasurable beauty, promise, and effort.

Three months later, I collected the pictures for washing. As the unexposed salts washed away, some faces came up pale and wan, or registered no image at all as though they had never existed. Others, burned dark by the sun, were stuck in the deep blue with only the whites of their eyes appearing.

A small group came out as good prints, the winners in a test of light and chemistry. These are just images that have either made it or failed, but with the faces of people wedded to the material it brings to mind parables of fortune and the effect of circumstance on the outcome of a life. Remembering the brilliance I saw in every face, I continue the project in my imagination. I've let go of the photographic analogy and instead picture a perfect, benevolent space for each real life to develop.



BLUE STUDENTS





BLUE STUDENTS

Notes for installation:

-I want to hang the negatives in such a way as to make them seem ubiquitous, unavoidable and kind of oblivious to normal viewing patterns.

-so I imagine them all over the place, in non-normal places as well, like way up on a high wall, it's as though they have other business than just presenting themselves for viewing.

-they don't have to be right in the space of another artist. They could be along the route a viewer would take on their way to another installation, they are peripheral.

-the small ones might mass up in a group or just appear here and there like specks.

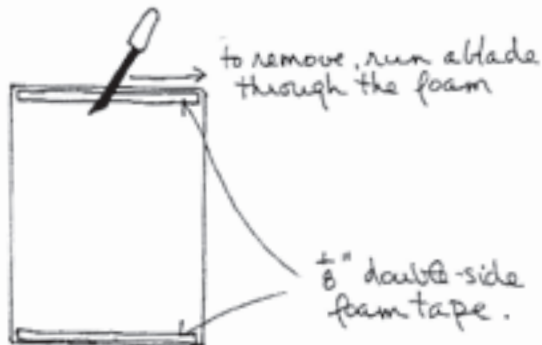
-some could be face-mounted to the inside of windows, looking out For this I would need black double-sided

-I think of double-sided because it sticks to anything and the foam can accomodate rough or uneven surfaces. I think that the big pictures won't weigh more than 10 lbs. so I think double-sided would do it. Also, the double-sided, applied top, bottom and maybe middle will prevent any bowing or warping or separation of the paper/neg. contact.

-the trouble with double-sided is getting the damn picture off the wall again at the end. Maybe if I put the tape right near the edge at the top and bottom, the foam can be sliced through with a blade and then the stuck side removed from the wall with solvent.

-basically, I want to be free to run around with the pictures on Thursday and Friday and stick them where-ever like a bunch of decals.

From the project descriptions, these are the places that seem possible: CECUT, for sure; Reincarnation Bldg.; Children's Mus; Cock-fighting pit, is it possible?; the SaN Ysidro Bus Station and Colonia Libertad, if there's a secure place; International Visitors Center; memorial Jr. High; Sante Fe Depot, various places; H&R Block; La Casita.



MAY-22-97 08:58 AM LIZ/MAGOR

604 215 5532

P.018

H.D. Davis?
5/27/1970
Nolan
to the glass bonded?
Valley Molding & Frame

Frank Muller
234-0846
TOP ART STORE

(F) Magor

nobody likes
to be liable -
they're not very
safe

TO: TRACEE WILLIAMS
FROM: LIZ MAGOR
604.215.5532

MAY 22 1997

Hi Tracee - I'll be using a kind of framing hardware for my clip frames. The clips are called INDIVIDUAL SWISS CLIPS. They are little metal clips that hold the glass + backing together with pressure. They look

1/2 x larger
than life



Kind of like this.

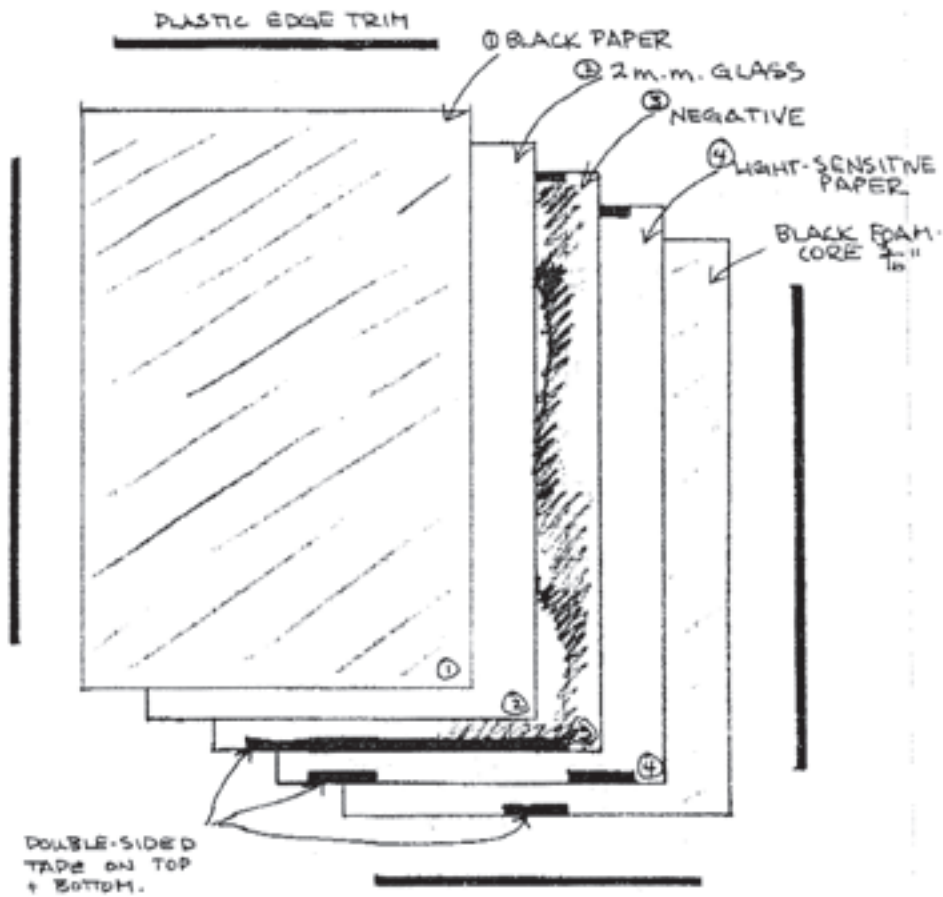


front
of picture.

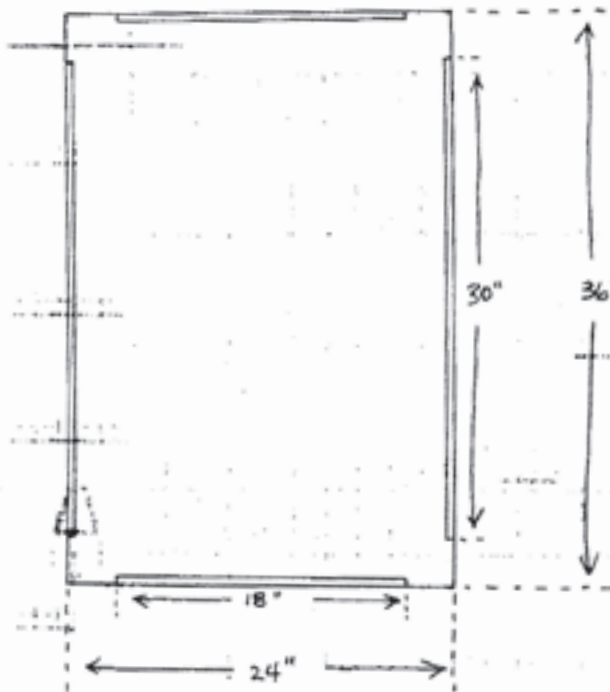
I will need about 1,000 of them. Can you please find a distributor in So. California and get me a price per 100. Also, ask if they have different sizes or gauges. You can try calling Picture Frame wholesalers + Manufacturers.

Thanks mucho - Liz.

2/5



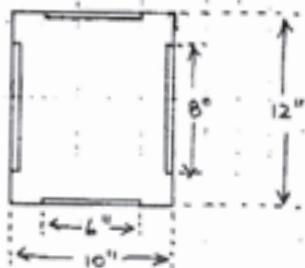
3/5



50 PIECES
24" x 36"

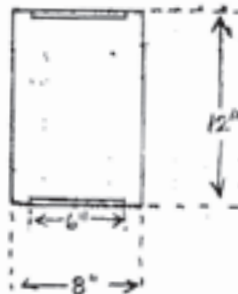
WITH EDGE TRIM
18" + 30"

GLASS THIS SIZE
SHOULD WEIGH
APPROX. 8 LBS.



150 PIECES
10" x 12"

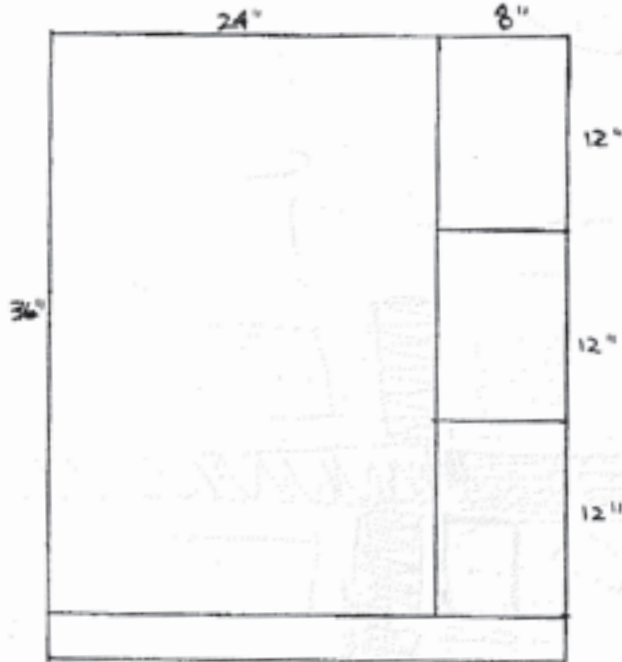
WITH EDGE TRIM
6" + 8"



50 PIECES
8" x 12"

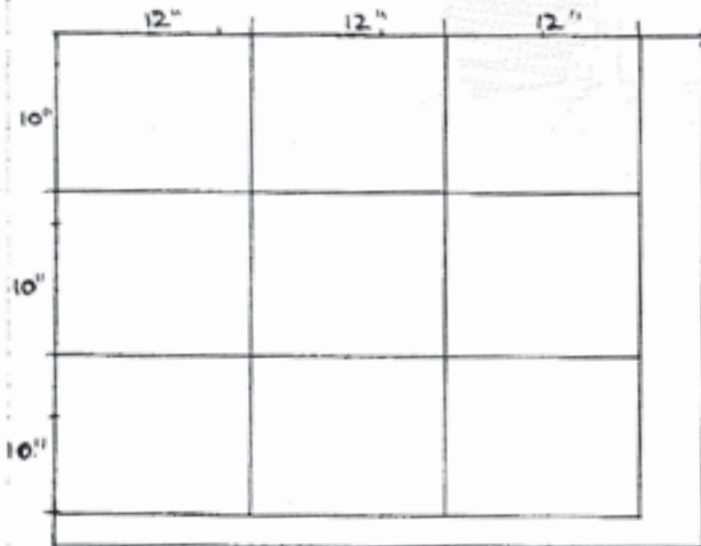
WITH EDGE TRIM
6"

FOAM CORE CUTTING PATTERN
BASED ON 32" x 40" SHEETS



32" x 40"
50 sheets

17 offcuts,
cut to 8" x 12"
= 50 pieces



32" x 40"
17 sheets



The Forces of Wolfe and Montcalm

Written for the exhibition *Beaver Tales* at Oakville Galleries,
Ontario, May 20–July 16, 2000

This work begins with play-acting. The people in the photographs are re-enactors, hobbyists enthralled with the fur trade era. They like to pretend that they are trappers, voyageurs, Indians, Highlanders, coureurs des bois, habitants, and soldiers in North America, circa 1750. Of course, they are none of these things. They are contemporary people in disguise, players in a game of hide-and-seek. They hide by living imaginatively in another era. I seek, looking for what drives them to escape their own time. To help me search I made two sculptures in the form of beavers so that they can watch when I'm not there. In fact, they can't stop looking. Like the re-enactors they are characters frozen in a role. Perpetually vigilant and anxious they wring their paws at the antics of the people in the pictures as though their ancient conflicts were about to begin again or had never ceased.

Because the beavers are stuffed we might regard them as unreliable witnesses. But their steadfastness is persuasive so I look closely at the people in the pictures to find out what causes such concern. I see ordinary people having a small adventure, but I also see folly; a romantic construction galvanized around a history that is cleared of all trauma and distress. Only the beavers seem to remember that this was a time of war. Their attitude is a retort to the blithe spirit of the costumed players, and the whole installation revolves around their resistance to the thesis of the re-enactors, I like to think of this as a debate, one which starts up again each time the work is exhibited and continues all night, even with the gallery lights off and the room empty of visitors.





On Retreats and Fake Dogs

Published with the title “Liz Magor” in *Canadian Art*, vol. 17 (Spring 2000)

NANCY TOUSLEY: A dog first appeared in your work with *Siberian Husky* in 1989, the same year as *Field Work*, a portfolio of photographs based on pictures you took originally in the nineteen-sixties of friends in headbands and beads who were playing at going back to nature. In the ensuing sculptures, the dog becomes an alter ego for the human being. In the photographs that followed, you took pictures of people trying on other kinds of identities by re-enacting historical events, mostly wars, dressed as Confederate soldiers, cowboys, voyageurs, coureurs des bois, trappers, and eighteenth-century militiamen. Is there a connection between them?

LIZ MAGOR: I did the hippie pictures in 1988 and 1989. In a way, that portfolio led to this work. Right after *Field Work*, I discovered the historical re-enactment movement. It seemed like a highly organized version of the identity shifting that the hippies were involved in, so I wanted to observe it. I started with the Civil War and then for six or seven years photographed re-enactors of different periods, usually replaying wars. Gradually, I noticed tendencies or characteristics that were common to all the re-enactors. It was as though they used historical personae as a sort of body armour. A psychic body armour. Being introverted myself, I recognize the tension people feel when they're in public situations; when they wish they could put on a mask just to talk to somebody, or would rather go home and go to bed. To me, the re-enactors were doing in a very overt way what is a commonplace and almost unremarked part of being a social person. I focused on the images that reveal that human trait.

TOUSLEY: Images other than the re-enactor photographs?

MAGOR: I began to see it in various forms, like the sculpture of the little white dog in the armour. He's wearing a full suit of armour and he's looking at a spider on the wall coming down on a thread. He's ready to do battle with this little non-threatening entity. If you walk around the dog, you see the only part that isn't covered is his tiny dink, a little fuzzy white thing. The piece is called *Willy and the Wall Spider*. It's sort of a joke about insecurity. In a less joking way, all these pieces are about the impossibility of really depending on yourself, and the ends you might go to feel strong.

TOUSLEY: What is the dog made of?

MAGOR: Inside it's foam covered with fake fur, then covered with steel armour. He's modelled after my little poodle, Wiley. Wiley is a fear biter. He's afraid of people, he's afraid of everything, and he's aggressive as a result. So he reminded me of these re-enactors I was meeting.

TOUSLEY: There is a fascinating recent book about Civil War re-enactors, *Confederates in the Attic*, by Tony Horwitz.

MAGOR: I've looked at it, but at the time I was going to re-enactments to take pictures, there was nothing good written about them. It's an amazing phenomenon. There are re-enactors all over the world playing out different stories. It's a situation where people have given themselves permission to inhabit fantasies in public. There are people who re-enact being infants. There are people who enact the animal spirits they think they have, like skunks or zebras. I think nobody is writing about this from a sociological or psychological point of view. But if you read it backwards, what is it a symptom of? What is the anxiety? What's being displaced or covered up by this role-playing?

TOUSLEY: What do you think it's symptomatic of?

MAGOR: Maybe in part it's a sign of the need to identify with a smaller group of people than we're being asked to identify with now. I don't think we can manage to feel kinship with millions of people, or even thousands. So we have to get it down to some reasonable number, and these are the means people use. Re-enactors manage about two hundred. If they reach more than two hundred members, they split into two groups. It's a social unit that's comfortable. For some of the works I've made recently I've imagined a character who's most comfortable in a group of one. An extreme case.

TOUSLEY: How does the Siberian husky in the 1990 exhibition, "Meeting Place," fit in with the dogs you made later on?

MAGOR: That was a dog sleeping in the snow, similar imagery to the dog sleeping in the cabin. Maybe at the time I was less knowing of where the imagery was coming from, but now I see sleeping as a way to hide. Just like holes and burrows are places to hide.

TOUSLEY: The objects in the cabin included a lot of war paraphernalia. Were they objects you made? How do they function in relation to the dog, which has such a different character?

MAGOR: I had them made for me. Another thing that interested me about the re-enactor movement was the range of artisans who make reproductions of stuff from the past. I thought, in a way, it goes along with some contemporary art and culture that's involved in making "new antiques." They're like souvenirs of a time that people romanticize. I commissioned all this war paraphernalia: helmets and gauntlets and broad swords and battleaxes, hand grenades and artillery. They're very realistic. So the cabin was full of gear for fighters from Teutonic knights to the Vietnam War. The cabin looked armoured, armed. The thickness of the logs was like armour, too. The cabin was just like a hard shell. There was enough food for one person to survive. Then there was the white dog on the bed, which looked quite fake, but also very appealing and vulnerable, like a teddy bear. It seems to be the thing being protected.

TOUSLEY: It has almost abstract form.

MAGOR: The dog came directly from something I saw at a Celts re-enactment. They had a king, I think his name was King Brian. He was a huge guy with long hair and a beard, hair everywhere, with furs and skins draped over him. He had three skinny little whippets on his lap, all tangled together, trying to get warm. It looked literally as if his psyche had dropped out and fallen on his lap, incredibly bare and vulnerable. After that, for quite a few works, I used this bare white dog as the soft centre, as the thing that's being protected.

TOUSLEY: So the white dog in the cabin is a relative of Willy and the white dog in *One Bedroom Apartment*?

MAGOR: The cabin was in the [Toronto] sculpture garden and I showed *One Bedroom Apartment* (1996) at Susan Hobbs Gallery at the same time. The dog in that piece is sitting under the table. You can see him clearly until you approach him, he disappears because the table's foreshortening covers him. It's like he slides into a hiding place. The dog in the cabin was an extreme case, like the person who becomes a survivalist, a misanthrope, a hermit. The dog in the gallery represents

a simpler, unremarked type of hermit, someone who stays home a lot and watches TV and makes a nest.

TOUSLEY: Were you still photographing re-enactors?

MAGOR: The re-enactors were gone by this time, but I photographed them for quite a few years, and maybe I was wanting to push the photographs back a bit. I really think of sculpture as a way of making a more complex picture.

TOUSLEY: Is that what took you back to sculpture?

MAGOR: I guess I hadn't realized I'd left it. When I did the photographic works, I was just learning another language. Maybe what seemed to be leaving sculpture was just a growing interest in photography. Then my interest was satisfied and I felt I could spring back to sculpture.

TOUSLEY: You mentioned that *Sleeping Pouches* and *Hut* started with wanting to make a warm bed for your dog.

MAGOR: Maybe Wiley isn't even cold at night in his basket, but I feel cold when he's in the basket, so I wanted to make a covered basket, like a pouch, for him. I have two dogs and I always cover them up when they're sleeping. I wrap them up in sweaters and blankets. All you can see are their little furry heads sticking out.

TOUSLEY: A hollow form that protects something vulnerable and soft almost begs for a story when it becomes a cedar log. Where do the log sculptures come from?

MAGOR: They come from seeing a wanted poster for a guy named Kevin Vermette, who was suspected of killing three young men in Kitimat, BC, in 1997. He disappeared into the woods and he's still at large, or dead, we don't know.¹ For me, it's counter-intuitive to feel safer in the woods. A human in the woods is a very anomalous thing, so to hide there seems bizarre. The tree pieces come from thinking about how he disappeared, how he might be hiding.

TOUSLEY: Did they ever find any trace of Vermette?

¹
Vermette is still at large as of early 2022.

MAGOR: No. When I started the work at Equinox, I did a lot of research on other fugitives who had gone into hiding in the wilderness and I chose three (Vermette, the Mad Trapper of Rat River, and Mike Oros). There were certain things they had in common. I was going to make a piece for each one. The three pieces were going to be very specific habitats for these guys. Eventually, I gave that up; it seemed like more information than I needed.

TOUSLEY: The idea of that kind of escape is thrilling.

MAGOR: A lot of people want to do it. They say Eric Rudolph, the guy accused of bombing the abortion clinic in Birmingham, Alabama, is hiding in the Smoky Mountains and has the support of the people down there. It's possible they're even aiding him.² There's a space in many peoples' imagination for this kind of romantic fugitive. I was trying to think of a time when living in a tree seemed possible to me. I was a kid, and my brother and I were afraid the Russians were going to bomb us. I said, "Don't worry, Johnny, we'll just go into the woods." We dug little caches and stocked them with food and got them ready. It seemed perfectly okay. We were out of the system, we were in control.

TOUSLEY: How do the *Sleepers* relate to the logs?

MAGOR: I like them partly because they alter the scale. The *Sleepers* shift the scale of the big sculptures in a way that's interesting physically. I can't say more about it; they just make the scale more lively.

TOUSLEY: I found them mesmerizing. Some people who saw the Equinox show found them very disturbing, but they seemed more like benevolent spirits to me.

MAGOR: They are a touch morbid because they are so permanently bound up. They look like they're wrapped in blankets but in fact they are cast into solid rubber plugs. They're in a deep, deep sleep. Some people refer to them as dead babies, but they're not babies. I used dolls inside the blankets to make the form, but I made sure they had full heads of hair. They're about people in deep retreat, so deep that they almost can't be retrieved.

2

Rudolph was arrested in North Carolina in 2003. In 2005 he was sentenced to four consecutive life terms without parole.

TOUSLEY: Do you think living on the West Coast and exploring remote islands and their history gets into your work?

MAGOR: It must. The possibility of not living in a community might be impossible for someone in a city to imagine, whereas for me it's very possible. I don't need to use my imagination to see the theatre in which a solitary life could exist.

TOUSLEY: After working for so long with unconventional materials, how do you feel about using bronze?

MAGOR: I use materials that are accessible and manageable and in some way compatible with the subject of the work. Bronze is so culturally inflected that I wondered if it could be about something besides the tradition of the material. I didn't want to use it ironically. So I looked and looked but rarely saw anything that was more than a "bronze sculpture." But the Bill Reid sculpture at the Canadian Embassy in Washington is different.³ The patina is black, a dull matte black. I guess it's an approximation of argillite.

TOUSLEY: Is the patina what makes the difference?

MAGOR: The patina and the really complicated carving, together, overwhelm the bronze and I don't really see bronze there. It's as though a more powerful thing has subdued it. Another example is Degas's little ballerina with the fabric tutu.⁴ Somehow, the second material, which is sort of ratty and worn, extends a condition of vulnerability to the bronze and I see it in a different way, as more ephemeral. The bronze isn't overpowered, it seems more sensitive. I like that alteration. I based my tree project more on this idea. I want the bronze log to act as protection for a soft centre. The soft centre is the sleeping bag inserted into the hollow core of the trunk, with a sort of puffy protuberance at one end. So the bronze takes on some other qualities, it seems benevolent, protective.

TOUSLEY: The cedar log sculptures, *Hollow* and *Burrow*, are so strongly evocative of the mythology of the BC coast as a place of last resort for outcasts and fugitives. How will the associations attached to a hollow log change when it becomes a hollow willow log in Ontario?

3

The Spirit of Haida Gwaii, The Black Canoe, 1986–91.

4

Petite danseuse de quatorze ans (Little Dancer Aged Fourteen), 1880–81. Originally sculpted in wax, it was cast in bronze after Degas's death in 1917.

MAGOR: I don't think of the cedar logs as being about BC particularly. I am looking for images that suit the misanthrope, the person who finds society to be painful, a failure. Wherever there is a city, there are citizens who want out, who dream of a solitary, independent life. I'm sure there are just as many restless people in Toronto as Vancouver.

TOUSLEY: The context has nothing to do with place, then?

MAGOR: The context is city versus not-city. Every city has its near-by last resort, its wilderness card. Since most people don't actually go so far as to run away, they keep this card in reserve and it becomes a romance. The cabin in the park was intended to play on this. On the outside it was the dream log cabin. On the inside it was like a defensive bunker.

TOUSLEY: Is "sense of place" a romantic trope you would like to get away from?

MAGOR: Not so much "sense of place" but the idealized sense of "a better place." Especially when this better place is located as being in nature. The tree sculptures obviously are signs of nature, but they also bear signs that they were manufactured. It could be that they were purchased at a camping or hunting store. I want the tree at York to look like it might be an architectural feature done in the shape of a tree.⁵ I won't landscape it or emphasize the nature around it. When someone approaches I hope they will think, "This looks like a tree but it's impossible for a tree to be here."

TOUSLEY: So that ambivalence becomes part of the content of the work?

MAGOR: It's more like uncertainty. The art part for me is when you are working out what it's about, what it means. I don't want to cut it short by providing a resolved situation. Even though many of these works have images of dogs, they often look like fake dogs. So it's hard to hold onto the notion that it's really a dog. There are different ways to work out this dilemma and how a viewer manages that is what the work is really about. It becomes more a matter of what you need to believe.

5

Magor is referring to *Keep* (2000), a sculpture installed at York University in May 2000.





The Lenticular

Published in *Facing History: Portraits of Vancouver* (Arsenal House Press, 2002), ed. Karen Love, a book produced following an exhibition at Presentation House Gallery (now Polygon Gallery), North Vancouver, September 8–October 28, 2001. The text is a response to Corrine Corry's 1997 diptych *...I realized it was not a photograph of me, but of my mother*

This work is hard to look at. There are two cards, each presenting a pair of portraits, which appear to occupy the same position. With a slight movement of the viewer's head one disappears to reveal the other as in some kind of filmic dissolve. These are lenticular cards, using a printing technology that puts two images in one place by way of faceted ridges, a sliver of image clinging to either side of the ridge. With some head-wagging the viewer learns how to effect these dissolves; girl to woman; woman to woman, thus gaining some control over the viewing of the work. But this security is short-lived as the receding portrait doesn't entirely disappear. Instead it remains uncannily present through some other mechanism.

All four figures resemble one another to an extraordinary degree. The persistence of one in the other is vaguely defiant, daring you to identify each as an individual while they are evidently one and the same. For the card with portraits of two women the contest is more critical because the figures are dressed and posed in exactly the same fashion. This is the visual analogy to sensing the existence of kin in your body, when a gesture, an inflection, a gait feels shared, or borrowed from another, most often a parent. The feelings in this event are mixed; surprise, chagrin. Or, loss and longing. In some sense you feel inhabited as your lenticular body holds more than one identity.

This is what makes these cards hard to look at. In a few dozen square inches, they encapsulate the impossibility of individuation combined with the inevitability of difference. What more poignant demonstration of family and human relationships? Even while separate, we are part of a unit. In a blink we dissolve from I to we. And back again.



Faint

Published in the catalogue for *Thin*, an exhibition of work by
Rhonda Weppler at YYZ, Toronto, September 11–October 2, 2002

Roughly speaking, there are only three ways to manufacture a form: you can add to a material until it bulks up into a particular shape; you can subtract from a material until it is carved to a particular shape; or you can fold and bend material until it assumes a particular shape. The adding and subtracting methods are ancient, of course, and form the basis of much of the history of object-making. The folding and bending, historically, has been more problematic as it requires thin material endowed with tensile strength, the choice of which was somewhat limited in a preindustrial age. Now, however, in the era of plastics, sheet metal, and laminated wood we are surrounded by thin materials shaped or stretched into things like cars, appliances, clothing, furniture, knickknacks, and toys.



Often, these sheet materials are shaped into hollow forms which in turn are used as containers to store more things made of thin materials. Eventually the build-up of these layers and sheets conspire to become bulk and mass; bookshelves lined with books, drawers filled with clothes, cupboards stacked with dishes, until the house is full. Ultimately the house is infused with stored experience as each sheet and layer carries the charge of its meaning and use. Usually this feels good, especially if order prevails and our storage system remains unquestioned. But when there is a shift, an emptying out, a move or a collapse, the layers move away from each other, revealing their insubstantiality, their provisional and pathetic identity.



Inside Out Wardrobe presents exactly this inversion—it has heaved out its contents. We can't know why exactly, but the consequences are clear. While the wardrobe still stands, stubbornly holding onto detail, the dependence on its crummy joinery is harrowing. Nothing but peeling masking tape keeps the box together and the paper-thin walls of this would-be armoire remain upright only by virtue of persistent right angles. An obvious problem is the lack of “laminated” as in “wood laminate.” Here we have just one layer of wood veneer striking out on its own, looking wavery and overworked. This lonely veneer appears elsewhere; as tables in a similar state of near collapse standing colt-like on their folded legs, or as two chairs that husband their strength by joining seats.

Perhaps these pieces made of wood veneer are inescapably frail. They appear antique-like after all. Antiques are old, so fragility is in order.

But with *Dresser*, made of white plastic, the vintage changes. It's more a melamine thing, an Ikea thing. Certainly the sweet wobbliness of the veneer pieces is gone but somehow a feebleness remains. A better word might be weakness. We slide from the melancholy of times past to the prevalent crappiness of contemporary consumerism. Reinforcing the idea that the structure is puny is the merging of the coloured decals with the side panel. There isn't even enough material to offer distinct space to these appliques. Still, they continue to emit their bright messages because as signs they are still able to do their job. It is the dresser which has been disabled—it appears to be shrinking back to two dimensions.

In subsequent sculptures, signs begin to take over as they take advantage of the incipient flatness. *Banopoly* is “box-like” only because the graphic references to the Monopoly game and The Bay department store imply that these may be box lids. Likewise, *Sideways Window* promises more containers, small product boxes and bottles, but from behind it's just logos again, as though the brands have forced out the contents.

Apart from *Jello*, *Shed* is the only sculpture that attempts to do a job, that is to be a container that keeps its contents; a ladder, a crate, and some boards. All the furniture pieces have jettisoned their charges and present image without function, as if this feat alone has used up all their resources. *Shed* appears to be only marginally more able. Its adhesive tape joinery has been upgraded from earlier works but the larger scale without an increase in thickness of veneer puts it in jeopardy of keeling over. It has four walls and a roof, which stiffen it somewhat, but the effort it expends to remain a proper container causes it to lose its exterior, revealing the unprepared side of the veneer. Shaken but still standing, the shed doggedly maintains its contents, a fact revealed by the cracks between the boards. There is stuff in there, but there is also an odd relationship of things to the wall. The shed, in a co-dependent gesture, grips onto each object at its point of contact and employs it as a brace. Thin gets smart.

It's easy to project character—smart, stupid, sad—onto these sculptures; to see them as excerpts from a story of crisis or collapse. While there is an obvious danger of obscuring presence and formal ideas with this narrative drive, the value here is in the consideration of the



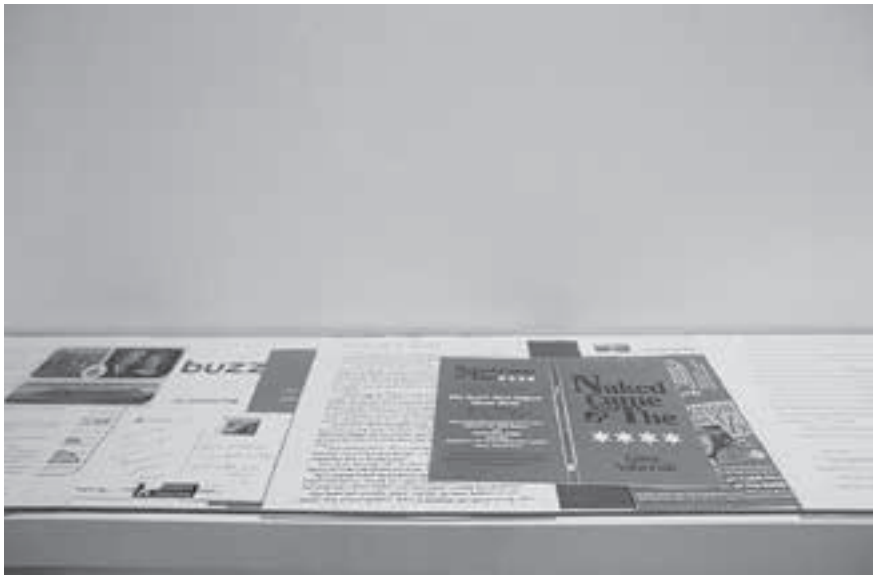
mutability of the material world and the role it plays in our coming to know ourselves.

We have to love the degree to which Marcel Proust cherishes his bedroom furniture. Conjuring his various sleeping rooms, their walls, windows, beds, and dressers from non-being into existence, he simultaneously, rescues himself as he “puts together by degrees the component parts of my ego”¹ which had been whirling around, formless in an unidentified space. As he dreams himself into a particular room with its precise decor he is able to inhabit the desires and anxieties of that time past. In their lack of completion these schematic sculptures seem consistent with Proust’s requirement for things, that they be partially articulated forms offering themselves as vehicles for recapturing experience. Although their images are faint and their bodies thin-walled these sculptures remain persistent in maintaining such an offer.

1

Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C.K. Scott-Moncrieff and Frederick A. Blossom (New York: Random House, 1934), 1:5.





On Rita McBride

Published as “Postscript 14: Liz Magor on Rita McBride”
in conjunction with McBride’s exhibition *No Fixed Address*
at Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver, March 13–April 17, 2004

Air travel. Still the best, in spite of the forfeited nail scissors, small-scale movies, and possible embolisms. Graham Greene said he accepted any assignment that required a flight of eight hours or more. He admitted that he found relief from depression and despair in the confined space of an airplane, escaping the gravity of his own identity through the promise of the unpredictable and the reorganization of his habitual character.

This is an understandable sentiment and in the course of flying to one's destination it is possible to feel kinship with fellow travelers knowing that we all have been removed from the same old place and look forward to being deposited at a new place with an equal chance of starting over. A psychic community is formed as each passenger engages in the same shape-shifting required by such a passage. Taking this further, when a plane goes down, carrying all passengers to their deaths, it's impossible not to imagine the intense bond that is unexpectedly forged as each occupied seat brings with it an identical date of demise. But let's not think of going down. Let's think of flying, alone, to an appointment. An assignment that requires our presence making these few hours before arrival pregnant with enforced passivity. A passivity that drives us to watch the movie, cruise the audio program, and flip through *Vanity Fair* all at the same time, while reviewing a plan to hit the ground running.

As the plane begins its descent and the oxygen-poor air becomes jumpy, the band of flyers begins to break up, shifting the focus from cabin life to thoughts of meeting people on the ground. For our solitary traveler, on assignment, the people on the ground may be strangers, known only by phone or email. Curators perhaps, installers, dealers, other artists; colleagues dedicated to the same project, forming themselves as the new community poised to replace the little village of airline passengers. This is good, because travel can be lonely and the itinerant worker wisely engages co-workers for both business and pleasure.

At Artspeak, in her work *No Fixed Address*, Rita McBride has invented a situation that recognizes our propensity for serially forming and dissolving particular and devoted groups. The gallery holds a queen-sized waterbed covered by a bedspread embellished with pictures of airsickness bags. The bed is positioned so that its occupants can watch

a flickering fire on a monitor attached to the ceiling while listening to a recital of chapters from a bizarre story on additional speakers. Elsewhere in the gallery, background information describes the production of this story as a collaborative work made up of chapters contributed by a growing number of artists and colleagues; another small community, gathered this time in the binding of the book.

A loop is forming, started by the artist flying to her job, hooking up with those who write and read this work, then extending to the people dropping in to see what's going on. These visitors elect themselves to the group by listening to the audio, perhaps relaxing on the bed, becoming linked participants who enlarge the work person by person. This is, in effect, a sculptural "Friendster"¹ program, forming an organism that exists and grows on the nourishment of our personal interaction with each other, an interaction facilitated by our shared interest in art. Is this a description of a club? Perhaps, although throughout the structure there are caveats with regard to the terms of its incipient clubiness. Not only are the stories, centred around the character of Gina Ashcraft, strangely violent and fraught with themes of art world competitiveness and striving, but also the work that occupies the gallery has clearly conflicting signifiers. In graphic terms it suggests that the sensual relaxation offered by the bed will be paid for by the vomitty upset of travel and stress. For every fun trip there is a dose of fatigue and doubt. Rather than face the whole deal alone, McBride assembles us, devising a structure that introduces us to each other. In this case, the bed can serve as both object and occasion for seeking company, and we use it according to our own inclination.

As the central character of *Naked Came The *****, Rita McBride's 2002 exhibition catalogue, Gina Ashcraft, is comical. A site-specific artist impelled to travel from exhibition to exhibition, she never seems to get it that the zany interactions which surround her work are in fact more compelling than the work itself. As a model for an artist, Gina is spoofed by this installation which posits that artworks are more useful as instruments for social interaction. This makes *No Fixed Address* a contemporary version of art about art, being, in itself, a perfect emblem for the nervous fun that is an artist's career.

¹
An early social networking site launched in 2003; defunct as of 2015.

Ancient Affections

Published in *Making China in China: Paul Mathieu*,
the catalogue for Mathieu's exhibition at the Richmond Art Gallery,
British Columbia, May 2–June 1, 2006.

I am writing this from a building in the northeast corner of Vancouver, hard up against the train tracks of Vancouver's industrial harbour. This is the edge of the city, its oldest part and not coincidentally the territory of the city's original Chinatown.

In this neighbourhood some two dozen blocks of shops and offices carry on a 100-year-old mandate to supply the public with furniture, giftware, food, herbs and medicine, clothing, news, music, art supplies, and any other commodity that China can produce. Germane to this essay are the stores selling porcelain. At a guess there are about 50,000 square feet of retail space in Vancouver's Chinatown devoted to porcelain.

The appearance of these stores remains consistent from decade to decade. We see the same blue and white vases in the window, tea sets in their personal boxes, big bowls, small bowls, dishes, and, of course, rows and rows of figurines. One has the impression that nothing has been sold since we were children. Predictable and calm, these shops don't promote the idea that we should be in style and they don't exploit our anxiety that all the good stuff will be sold out. Forever, their shelves hold the same type and amount of material. If something leaves, it is replaced with something identical. This is a different kind of retail; something like an archive, or a museum.

These stores resemble museums because they work with the classical and the traditional, but in contrast to museums they don't cherish and hold, nor do they worry about quality or provenance. They operate on the principle of extreme replaceability, receiving a flow of goods from China's many porcelain production centres, chief among them Jingdezhen in central China, where the Imperial Kilns were established over a thousand years ago. This city alone, half the size of Vancouver in population, produces one million pieces of porcelain a day and has done so every day since the Imperial era. This is a fact that requires a pause. Not only to register the astonishing quantity of breakable things being produced and handled, but to form a picture of what this output requires in physical and material terms; the number of bodies, hands, brushes, wheels, kilns, moulds, bags of plaster, tonnes of clay, vats of glaze, rows of shelves, and sheer focused attention that is mustered day after day in order to deliver the goods. Rest again, and then imagine what follows production; the

parallel business of selling, packaging, crating, and shipping the stuff to domestic and foreign markets. Most of this ware stays in China. Just a trickle comes to Vancouver, yet it courses through the shops in an enormous turnover. It is an illusion that these shops sit as still as museums. The stock is like water in a river, continually replaced but continually the same.

Arriving on his first trip to Jingdezhen with replicas of Matisse's *Henriette*, a most respected image from Europe's artistic legacy, the artist Paul Mathieu hazarded a way to mingle this strange (in China) form with the most regular of the city's artistic production. He simply submitted the heads to the skill pool he found in Jingdezhen, passing each bust around as piecework to various painters, while giving only a casual indication of the segment they were to fill. They chose the pattern. They chose the colours. In this way he effectively abandoned the object, as well as his judgement, to the concentrated resource he found there, acknowledging that the wet end of each brush was but the tip of a line of skill extending centuries into the past. In Jingdezhen an artist can use all the services available on a piece by piece basis. This includes mould-making, casting, firing, painting, glazing, everything. Even the beautiful silk-lined boxes used for packing the pieces are custom made and delivered within hours. Although the availability of labour means that an artist can develop a work by changing it during production, most Jingdezhen artists don't use the trades in that way. Their interest is not in process but in reliable repeatability and they know how to produce an object efficiently with very little variation or failure. Mathieu must have appeared very odd, going from place to place with his bubble-headed cast asking everyone to have a go at it, behaving as though he didn't have a clue.

Nevertheless, the Matisse head came back. Not only did it make its way home but it arrived sporting a wicked collection of designs picked up as it was trawled around the town. While each section of work is conventional, the accumulation of motifs is brazen, a scramble of half a dozen patterns normally dedicated to one form only; a vase, a teapot, a bowl. While Mathieu's approach to the decoration comes across as some kind of aesthetic promiscuity, there is in fact a covert conservatism at work. Most of these patterns were developed in the Ch'ing dynasty (1644–1912) for a Western market. In China, they are painted in enamels referred to as "foreign colours" because they



are done in a palette carried to China by the Jesuits two centuries ago. In a beautifully convoluted exchange, the foreign colours were developed in Europe in an attempt to copy the traditional Chinese “five colours” of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) (iron, cobalt, chrome, and manganese). Because mineralogical differences between China and Europe made an exact replication of the five colours impossible, the “foreign colours” were substituted and floated by the Jesuits, at which point a subtle hybrid was born when the colours came back to Europe rendered in exquisite Chinese patterns. The enthusiastic reception of this “chinoiserie” obscured forever their European genes and these decorative objects became firm signifiers of the exotic.

It is apparent that Matisse himself was attracted to this imported houseware, positioning Chinese (Oriental) vases and bowls in his paintings to speak of reverie, and of the vastness of the world beyond one’s home. There were several trade fairs of Eastern and Oriental material in Paris during Matisse’s career and while it is unknown whether he personally visited these exhibitions, their influence is recorded in his work as a graphic record of Europe/Asia trade of the time.

For his part, Mathieu is exquisitely aware of this exchange as one of thousands of small swaps made between artists from different worlds, a tendency especially evident in the decorative arts. His knowledge and devotion to the history of ceramics helped generate the Jingdezhen project and when he speaks about the work he says without sentiment that ceramics as a field is nothing less than “the memory of humankind”; a material record of the world’s cultural process. His arrival in China, with Matisse’s *Henriette* under his arm, indicates how willing he was to submit to that history, exposing his habits and ideas to a thorough scouring in Jingdezhen, a city of ruthless production. Jingdezhen is much greater than any one artist. Mathieu’s presence there, while a huge novelty to many of the inhabitants, will hardly make a difference to the way things are done. His intention to submit is borne out by how passive he is as the organizer of this heap of forms, patterns, colours, and references. It’s all a scramble, a problem for anyone who expects the units of meaning to hook up properly. As for *Henriette the Vase*, this is a lot of history to take on by herself, although she looks as lovely and bulbous as ever even with flowers coming out of her throat. Encouraged by the territory exposed by

the Matisse vases, Mathieu sought to spread the ideas across other forms and began borrowing moulds from the factories. The territory, to be precise, is a place where neither originality nor replication rules. The forms that constitute the “standards” in China’s ceramic industry; replicas of Michelangelo’s *David*, classic vase shapes, images of Buddha, objects which are turned out in their many millions, are disordered or misused by Mathieu in ways that refresh them. But because both the forms and the decorations come not from his hands but from those of an artisan who has performed the same job countless times we also hesitate to call them original.

Maybe this is a semantic ruse. After all, it is Mathieu who conceived the plan and paid the bills. Both intellectually and materially he is the owner, or the author of the work. It is his original work. But it is important to note that he rejected almost none of the work he commissioned. Flower motif and trailing decoration, painting blue and white, carved surfaces, painted replicas of photographs, the services provided by the artisans of Jingdezhen will vary in the quality of execution just as they do in any area of craft. Mathieu did not seek the best in the pool nor did he distinguish the varying abilities by separating them from one another. It’s as though the quality doesn’t count, it’s the range that matters. Even things that broke in the kiln are glued back together with gold or bright red enamel. This project has no word for “mistake,” a perverse attitude in that the work avails itself of an extraordinary skill pool and tradition yet assumes no apparent criteria for judgement. The artist is uncoupling significant binaries—skill from value, form from use, culture from tradition—and he is making these breaks, literally, at the point of manufacture, not at the point of use or ideation, which would be the choice, respectively, of design and of art.

At every opportunity the artist eschews the accepted role of the forms and patterns. Pressing clay into the mould for a face should produce a hemisphere, but avoiding this expectation allows the artist to see Buddha’s face from behind and use it as a bowl instead. Another loony idea has clusters of little heads, cast as full spheres, behaving as legs for these big faces. Pressing clay into a group of smaller moulds makes faces which are themselves used as moulds. Accordingly, these mates are painted in reverse; decoration on the convex side, facial features on the inside and the finished pairs rest there, cheek by jowl,



in a confusion of which is which, who's on top and what came first: the mould or the cast?

In *The Social Life of Things*, Arjun Appadurai makes a claim for a methodological fetishism that grants an almost anthropomorphic will to objects, “even though from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context.”¹ This isn't a mistake; some kind of academic voodoo. It is an attempt to say that material has influence, and that it shows us what to do. Commenting on Appadurai's rejection of the more familiar fetishizations—those of the subject, the image, the word—Bill Brown writes,

These [Appadurai's] are questions that ask less about the material effects of ideas and ideology than about the ideological and ideational effects of the material world and transformations of it. They are questions that ask not whether things are but what work they perform—questions, in fact, not about the things themselves but about the subject-object relation in particular temporal and spatial contexts. These may be the first questions, if only the first, that precipitate a new materialism that takes objects for granted only in order to grant them their potency—to show how they organize our private and public affection.²

The word *affection* gets our attention here. I suddenly wonder what affection Mathieu's pieces have organized for themselves. Did anyone love them in China? I ask that especially of those who worked on them. But I ask it of viewers here as well. What will the art world make of their intense craft identity? For that matter what will the ceramic people do with them, can they overlook the cracks and the farmed-out labour? Finally, I try to imagine these dishes in the porcelain shops of Chinatown, waiting there on shelves with all the rest, hoping to attract someone's eye. They almost fit, but in fact they are relatively useless and their lack will be deduced rather quickly. They are difficult as bowls and their images are so far from home that they're rendered senseless.

1

Arjun Appadurai, Introduction to *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 5.

2

Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” in *Things*, ed. Bill Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 7.

Is this their job then, to shift and move? To join a group, of art or design or craft and then quit? Quit before we fire them. Are they designed to mis-fit? I imagine so. Because as they slip from one category to another they leave a trace, an afterimage of our expectation of things. And as we fall into the gap between what they are and what we hope they will be we are moved ever so slightly from our accustomed position. If we move like this again and again, let's say a million times a day for a thousand years, we might become broad, we might become deep; building bit upon bit like a great and ancient culture.





Therese Veh, 1902–1986

Written in 2010 and published with a photograph shown in *Exposure*
at Susan Hobbs Gallery, May 30–August 18, 2012

Under the right circumstances, it's possible for an individual western red cedar tree to live for more than a thousand years. While this is a spectacular lifespan, relative to other living things, the life itself is not spectacular given that the time is passed while standing in the same rooted spot. As the form gradually changes, the intention of the plant remains constant in its devotion to transpiration and photosynthesis.

In contrast, a human life is spent in motion, the result of physical and psychological restlessness. In its social context the purpose of a human life is expected to exceed mere survival and the body is catapulted through a variety of roles and identities, many conceived of by the mind.

In the photograph *Therese Veh, 1902–1986*, a bronze plaque recording the span of a woman's life is found attached to the broad trunk of an ancient cedar. In effect an agreement has been made between the woman and the tree. The massive, peaceful body of the tree is assumed by the woman while the excitement of individual identity is taken on by the plant. Is this what Therese Veh looks like, or is this what the tree is called?

About Blankets; Kings and Queens

Unpublished, March 2011

I wanted to find a way to deal with the same subjects as before, but without the horror of mould-making and casting. Casting things from different categories, in the same material, and often in the same casting event, renders them equal and I guess that was the interest; levelling disparate things (cigarette butts = dead mouse) by making them one object. But there must be other ways to do this, assembling the real instead of replicas. I started with textiles, simply because they interest me.

If I invent a class system for textile products, I would probably put dresses at the top and towels at the bottom. Towels are like trays and dishes. Does that make dresses like cigarettes and candies? Dresses are princesses.

Anyhow, I'm pretty sure that towels, sheets, and blankets are like cutlery, dishes, and trays; a kind of servant class.

I recently up-sized to KING in the bed department. First, I noticed how ugly the shape is, virtually a square. Then I noticed how a king-size bed renders all my blankets and sheets useless because they're too small. They used to be just right, but now they are from the old fashion.

Should I just bin them? Or can they have another chance?

I've brought together dozens of blankets, all of them wool but not all in good condition. If I overlook their appearance and muster them to deliver a larger size, it seems that a salvage is underway.

Three or four of them can co-operate to form a larger sized blanket; king or queen. If that happens, they've proven something, including their willingness and endurance, which was previously disregarded.

But what about appearance; the holes and stains? Not good. Their weariness in the material sense could be construed as exhaustion of spirit. With these flaws subject to a makeover also, a whole new form appears, an assembly of pieces presented as a whole, new, utilitarian object.

Dry-cleaned even.





Burn, Burn, Burn

Unpublished notes for a 2011 lecture at Emily Carr University,
Vancouver. An excerpt appeared in *Liz Magor: The Blue One Comes in
Black* (Marseille: Triangle France; Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2015)

The title of my talk comes from this book, *On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac, published in 1957. The story is a slightly fictionalized account of a road trip undertaken by two buddies, Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise, as they roam the country in a quest for self-knowledge and experience. Sal of course stands in for Kerouac. Dean Moriarty is inspired by an extraordinary real character named Neal Cassady.

[Projected image of Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady together]

Dean seemed to be doing everything at the same time. It was a shaking of the head, up and down, sideways; jerky, vigorous hands; quick walking, sitting, crossing the legs, uncrossing, getting up, rubbing the hands, rubbing his fly, hitching his pants, looking up and saying “Am,” and sudden slitting of the eyes to see everywhere; and all the time he was grabbing me by the ribs and talking, talking. (114)

In various biographies Cassady’s frantic pace is attributed to schizophrenia or bi-polar disorder. In his own time however, and amongst his own milieu, which included Allen Ginsburg and William S. Burrows, he was known as a beat cat looking for kicks. Apparently, he was the Beat-est of them all—handsome, physically brave, and verbally astounding. His gift was for talking. He developed a form of uninterrupted commentary that flowed, like music, like jazz, dodging, riffing, and improvising as he went, maintaining several levels of thought simultaneously. He was juggler of words. He was also a con and a fabulist with a charm so fatal that he was protected by several wives at the same time.

I recently bought a used copy of *On the Road*. It was published in 1997 and is called the fortieth anniversary edition. Originally it was purchased as a birthday gift and the dedication reads:

Alexander — on the eve of you becoming 19 and officially a man here in Vancouver I thought this book should belong to you. Because it is about being young, adventurous, and unafraid of what the world might offer you. I love you and you will always, always be my baby Ali — Sissy

This inscription indicates how far the myth of *On the Road* has migrated from what the book really is or what it is about. Perhaps people don't actually read the book, and take on someone else's evaluation. Or perhaps they confuse the admiration paid to the writing with an admiration for the actions of the characters. At the time of its publication a review by Gilbert Millstein in the *New York Times* started the ball rolling:

This book requires exegesis and a detailing of background. It is possible that it will be condescended to by, or make uneasy, the neo-academics and the "official" avant-garde critics, and that it will be dealt with superficially elsewhere as merely "absorbing" or "intriguing" or "picaresque" or any of a dozen convenient banalities, not excluding "off beat." But the fact is that "On the Road" is the most beautifully executed, the clearest and the most important utterance yet made by the generation Kerouac himself named years ago as "beat," and whose principal avatar he is. ("Books of the Times," September 5, 1957)

The Beat Generation was born disillusioned; it takes for granted the imminence of war, the barrenness of politics and the hostility of the rest of society. It is not even impressed by (although it never pretends to scorn) material well-being (as distinguished from materialism). It does not know what refuge it is seeking, but it is seeking.

This search for affirmation takes Sal on the road to Denver and San Francisco; Los Angeles and Texas and Mexico; sometimes with Dean, sometimes without; sometimes in the company of other Beat individuals whose tics vary, but whose search is very much the same (not infrequently ending in death or derangement; the search for belief is very likely the most violent known to man).

In truth, Cassady and Kerouac were more than disillusioned. Cassady was arrested over one hundred times for petty theft, cars mostly. He and his circle courted collapse, falling in and out of jail, small claims court, marital beds, and hospitals. They fueled their fires with Benzedrine, grass, heroin, cocaine, and alcohol. Kerouac died at age forty-seven of alcoholism, Cassady died, in mid-step, at age forty-two. They say his heart simply stopped beating. I wonder if this is what Sissy had in mind.

[Projected images of Cassady and Kerouac later in life]

Against this background I will read the whole paragraph that contains my title.

The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars. (5–6)

This clearly is a manifesto for living. A demand to take your resources and use them, all at once, in the interest of intensity, catharsis, and spectacle. No holding back, no fatigue, no normal. This image of a roman candle, a tube packed with gunpowder, then set alight to exploit that fuel in one short intense burst is an apt description of a particular attitude toward life; one associated with a long list of poets, rock stars, and various daredevils, each blessed with a wild, short, life. Most recently, Paul Wong¹ invoked this attitude when he spoke of the relationship between insanity and genius, the social lust for drama and madness, and the poignancy of death when it occurs in youth.

¹
Canadian artist. He had recently given a guest lecture in this class.

[Projected image of a cigarette in an ashtray]

I want to examine this attitude, this valorization of the short intense life over the long cautious life by considering another tube filled with fuel: the humble cigarette. Not as spectacular as a firecracker, but similar. Here again is a paper tube filled with fuel, burning in a wick-like fashion, leaving behind nothing but ash. In a way, cigarettes are fireworks adapted to domestic use. An artifact from the Beat Generation that allows a less fraught dance with danger and excitement.

[Projected images of cigarette warning labels]

But the romantic relationship of the smoker to her small object of desire is modified by a strident list of negatives well known and highly broadcast. A barrage of bulletins warns of gum disease, yellow teeth, endangered fetuses, blackened lungs, and orphaned children. Inevitably, this pressure has turned the tide against smoking,

causing waves of quitting. Eighty percent of the population in North America identifies as non-smoking. Those who still suck and blow feel oppressed and reviled.

[Projected image of office workers smoking outside in winter]

This is true for all but one social group; which I'll refer to as artists, but by which term I mean to cover all creative fields. I would have to guess, but my amateur survey tells me that within this group the percentage of people who smoke is higher than the national average. And I know without asking that artists defy the statistics claiming smokers have a lower level of education or social status.

[Projected image of the Icelandic pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale]

Look at this picture of a party at the site of the Icelandic pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale. The artist Ragnar Kjartansson used the pavilion as his studio during the exhibition. He and his friends used it as a place to party afterwards. Do these people look ashamed? Oppressed, snaggly-toothed, stinky, sick, stupid, or naive? Do they look unattractive? Artists smoke with such bravado that there is something on display, a credo, a manifesto of something. A declaration, but a declaration of what?

I asked this question of a group of people who were photographing my studio for an issue of *Color* magazine. I said, "Demographically speaking, the first people to quit smoking were those with post-secondary education who had early access to the data that connected smoking with serious health issues. In the past twenty years the trend toward quitting has travelled through the socioeconomic strata to reach the working class. Although this trend has slowed somewhat, it continues. There is an exception to the rule that correlates quitting with higher education. Artists are generally well educated and economically advantaged. Yet they continue to smoke without shame or apology. Why is this?"

One of my visitors, a woman in her mid-twenties with fabulous black hair, alabaster skin, and a dog of rare Belgian lineage in her lap, answered without skipping a beat. "Because it's cool," she said.

In *Cool Rules: Anatomy of an Attitude*, the authors Dick Pountain and David Robins, clock the history of cool. They say,

Cool was once an attitude fostered by rebels and underdogs—slaves, prisoners, political dissidents—for whom open rebellion invited punishment, so it hid its defiance behind a wall of ironic detachment, distancing itself from the source of authority rather than directly confronting it. In the '50s this attitude was widely adopted by artists and intellectuals who thereby aided its infiltration into popular culture.... Today it is becoming the dominant attitude, even (or perhaps especially) among the rich and privileged who can wield it as merely the latest in a long line of weapons with which to put down their “social inferiors.” (23–24)

This is a pretty quick jump from slaves and dissidents to the rich and privileged. It's clear that the authors are interested in the contemporary version of cool, the version that has entered popular culture. They especially want to examine the role cool plays in marketing so they spend a lot of time talking about running shoes and denim, sliding right over my area of interest, the part about artists and intellectuals.

But they do claim that all eras of cool share behavioral traits:

We will argue that Cool is an attitude or personality type that has emerged in many different societies, during different historical epochs, and which has served different social functions, but is nevertheless recognizable in all its manifestations as a particular combination of three core personality traits, namely narcissism, ironic detachment and hedonism. (26)

Narcissism and hedonism, those don't sound good. Ironic detachment is a little easier to take but still, not so good; it sounds so passive.

I need to slide things around to make sense of this. If Kerouac is cool. If artists smoke because it's cool. If cool is a defensive strategy that helps us hide our true feelings from view. If art and intellectual activity are valued for their insight. If insight includes looking past appearance. Then art should be looking beyond style. Therefore, artists shouldn't or can't be cool.

I have an interest in believing that art is more than a concern with style. I have a lot invested in the set of activities that I call art so I need it to be deep, not superficial. When I first read *On the Road*, I had a confused feeling about it. I felt some unease. When I look at the picture of those artists in Venice I also have confused feelings. I am attracted and skeptical in equal measure.

A way for me to proceed, to get to the crux of the contradiction is to work at it, define the terms for myself. In this case I have to adjust or re-interpret the three components to see what cool really signifies.

[Projected image of *Mouse on Tray* (2008)]

They say we are narcissistic. I say we are lonely. Our families aren't here. We don't live in one place for long. To survive we must compete, which keeps us isolated. Even when we succeed, our jobs come to us in bits and pieces. We don't know what our neighbours think.

[Projected image of *Mouthful* (2008)]

Under these circumstances the best strategy is to be your own best friend. If you want to commune, or party, you invite the few people who are exactly like yourself and round out the gathering with portable pals: food, liquor, smokes.

A cigarette is an object designed for intimacy, it lets you put heat inside the body. Your mouth invites the silky smoke to enter. Your breath pulls it into the lungs where it is taken up by the blood to deliver its tiny kisses out to the tips of your fingers and into the curly crevasses of your brain. Cigarettes offer companionship without talk-back, and sensation without obliteration. Cigarettes are discrete friends, they keep their own counsel. They are devoted. They will never, never quit you.

Ironic detachment: If we are ironic and detached it is because we don't know the rules and we are uncertain as to action. We aren't sure what is right and what is wrong and we are subject to inconsistent reward systems. There is contradiction in the land, we should wait and see.

When you pause for a cigarette you give the impression that you've dropped out, turned away from others. When your focus is on your lips and how they will grip the filter, you look as though you are preoccupied and not suitable for work. But this impression is wrong. You are biding your time and collecting your thoughts. Sometimes the stepping out is literal; you close the door against the ricochet of voices screaming their accomplishments to the high white walls and you find yourself outside, under a soft night sky. Sometimes there are a few others out there and you join them in the ritual of breathing through a burning tube. Uncertainty is gone, you know the job and how to do it. You will be an amusing and gentle comrade in this company and you will use these quiet moments to pick up intelligence as to how to proceed when you re-enter the fray.

Something about competition.

With regard to hedonism, Pountain and Robins level this charge:

Cool is profoundly hedonistic but often to such a self-destructive degree that it flirts with death: by accident, suicide or some ambivalent admixture of the two (for example, a motorcycle crash or auto-erotic strangulation). (23)

This is getting complicated. If the definition of hedonism includes the notion that pleasure is the sole intrinsic good and should be the aim of living, how can it be combined with self-destruction (i.e., death, suicide, and auto-erotic strangulation)? Perhaps this is appropriate. What is life but one side of a coin? Heads you live, tails you die.

When you light a cigarette, you hit it with the Bic spark of life. The clock is started and for the short duration of its life; the little Camel, Marlboro, Benson, Hedges, or Rothman will be nursed and nurtured by its smoker. Each puff revives the thin red ring of fire which leaves a cylinder of cremation behind it as it heads for your fingers. Tendrils of smoke broadcast the event emerging from the precise point of transformation; on this side cigarette future, on this side cigarette past.

Often at a smoking event other friends of the mouth are in attendance, candies and little drinks. Some of these are exhausted having cast off their paper and foil garments. Others are offered up like newborns

by an extended service community of tables and trays which come from a culture of small furniture including dishes with slots, called ashtrays. Sometimes, after midnight, things get confused and objects like saucers or bottles are moved from delivery service to collection service. We hope this is for emergencies only, but overall, we expect this lower order of objects to support our revelry without complaint. In fact, if they can be pretty in the process so much the better.

[Projected image of *Leather (ashtray)* (2008)]

After tender cradling and kisses, a caring smoker will euthanize her charge before the foul burning of filter begins. Life is given and life is taken away.

So what is hedonism, what is indulgence then but the taking charge of sensation? It might well be seen as an antidote to the suppression of feeling demanded by the strategy of ironic detachment. Certainly, it seems active and engaged with the big forces. The smoker reels death in centimetre by centimetre, twenty times a day. She looks death in the eye so to speak. Doesn't this seem more reasonable and clear-eyed than the futile pursuit of health which is just a thinly disguised attempt to cheat death? No one cheats the Reaper, so if we hasten a natural process and arrive just a bit earlier at an inevitable destination, is this self-destruction or self-determination?

Dust to dust, ashes to ashtray.

Epicurus defined happiness as tranquility and freedom from fear. To follow this advice would suggest it's better to get close to death and get used to it. Or at the very least recognize that we are part of a cycle.

[Projected images of John Donne]

This is the seventeenth-century poet and Anglican cleric John Donne (1572–1631), known as the “death poet.” In an excerpt from a poem, “A Nocturnal on St. Lucy’s Day,” he wrote in the winter, on the shortest day of the year, when the plants are dormant:

Study me then, you who shall lovers be
At the next world, that is, at the next spring;
 For I am every dead thing,
 In whom Love wrought new alchemy.
 For his art did express
A quintessence even from nothingness,
From dull privations, and lean emptiness;
He ruin'd me, and I am re-begot
Of absence, darkness, death: things which are not.

At the end of Paul Wong's talk he said, "I live on the edge." He didn't say on the edge of what, assuming we would all understand it the same way. He is saying he's on the edge of collapse, of "absence, darkness, death: things which are not."

– I have just extended to smoking all the evaluating manipulations that I can in order to know it and judge it. I understand the charges against smoking but still I argue for its metaphysical value. This must mean I'm not ready to say goodbye to the image of a person with a cigarette. It means I see value there as a form of daily resistance to the ideology of perfection and the denial of death. I know, it sounds kind of daft. On reflection I realize I have specific and different ideas about all of the social drugs. I make distinctions between pharmaceutical and natural, illegal and prescription, beer and wine, hash and grass. Somehow, I have assigned different social values to all these through a complex construction of abstract compartments. I would even say I can determine a philosophy or school of thought associated with each.

– I do this quite automatically, developing my attractions and aversions in response to social biases that are almost invisible to me.

– *Remembrance of Things Past*, books

– Proust's grave

[Projected image of Proust's grave at Père Lachaise cemetery, Paris]

– In *Remembrance of Things Past*, written by Marcel Proust, published in 1924, the narrator recounts an early experience in his development of taste and judgement. He is invited to the theatre for a performance

of a renowned actress, someone of the order of Sarah Bernhardt. Due to his youth he has no prior knowledge of this celebrity and finds the event disappointing, unpleasant even. He regards the woman as ugly; coarse-featured and fat. Her performance is ludicrous in its melodrama. He comes away determined never to repeat the experience. However, in the following weeks as he hears his parents and their friends rave about the woman's peerless brilliance, he develops an excitement and pride in his recent proximity to the star. Manipulated by the opinion of his social milieu, his evaluation of her rises until he is bragging about his experience and avidly looking for an opportunity to attend her next performance.

– Proust's entire seven-volume work is devoted to this phenomenon; how "knowing" is based not on empirical fact but is a category of perception, which itself is dependent on context. In the context of "French society" at the turn of the century, he is able to chart the almost imperceptible tics that determine and control one's status and opinions. His observations are all about the mechanisms of class construction not at all about the fact of class.

– Listen to his description of "seeing" a friend:

Even the simple act which we describe as "seeing someone we know" is, to some extent, an intellectual process. We pack the physical outline of the creature we see with all the ideas we have already formed about him, and in the complete picture of him which we compose in our minds; those ideas have certainly the principal place. In the end they come to fill out so completely the curve of his cheeks, to follow so exactly the line of his nose, they blend so harmoniously in the sound of his voice that these seem to be no more than a transparent envelope, so that each time we see the face or hear the voice it is our own ideas of him which we recognize and to which we listen.

– So, how does this work with a cigarette? What do I pack into the physical outline of this delicate white cylinder? Or, further, into the outline of a human body which happens to have a lit cigarette appended to it, held in one of a variety of ways, dangling elegantly at the end of the fingertips, held carelessly in the lips at the side of the mouth, cupped defensively between the thumb and forefinger? What

other signifiers am I processing when I look out and see people and judge their character by their appearance?

– John Coltrane, Jack Kerouac, Pete Doherty

[Projected images of Coltrane, Kerouac, and Doherty smoking cigarettes]

– Do I think this smoker is like this smoker is like this smoker? If I saw them at separate intervals I might think the each have a genuine cachet of cool, but when I have them in such close comparison I think not. It looks more like Doherty has borrowed something from Coltrane in a series of transmissions.

To be developed:

- concepts of transmission of attitudes through social networks
 - definition of kitsch, “cool” is kitsch when it is “emptied out” of its original purpose—Roland Barthes (*Myth Today*)
 - concept of mimetic desire—René Girard
 - concept of addiction as self-medication for the severely traumatized
 - self-absorption vs. community involvement, looking out instead of looking in
 - addiction as a community problem, not a personal problem—Bruce Alexander
 - concepts of new “cool,” i.e., cool as constructive not self-destructive
 - idea of valorizing “service,” recognizing the supporters (Carolyn; the Cadillac in the excerpt etc.)
 - visualizing what has been obscured—the servant class
- Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige
Mythologies (Myth Today), Roland Barthes
Deceit, Desire, and the Novel, René Girard
Connected: The Surprising Power of our Social Networks and How they Shape our Lives, Nicholas Christakis, MD, James Fowler, MD
In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts, Gabor Maté
The Globalization of Addiction, Bruce Alexander
Off the Road, My Years with Cassady, Kerouac and Ginsburg, Carolyn Cassady





About
Lethbridge Telegram

Unpublished, 2012

The photographic aspect of my work has been concerned with the construction of false identity. I look for instances where the semiotic display of costume and paraphernalia is employed to mask the subject's ordinary identity, and effects the release of a romantic persona. I have located various manifestations of this urge to erase oneself, extending from the naive (hippies in pseudo-Aboriginal mode) to the recreational (cowboy "dudes" conducting a cattle drive from Montana to Wyoming) to the obsessive (hobby historians who re-enact wars).

In *Lethbridge Telegram* (1994), the subjects are engaged in World War I trench warfare at Fort Pickett, Virginia. On that weekend high temperatures conspired with a general lack of fitness in the troops to produce an unusually high mortality rate. Overworked soldiers feigned death in order to take a short break from fighting and inadvertently assumed postures of serenity and contemplation. The stillness on the field at Fort Pickett was a rare event—a rupture in the to and fro of fighting men. Though it meant exceeding my desire to be only a chronicler of other people's follies and fantasies, I took the opportunity to imagine pictures of domestic consequence. In a real war, the soldiers think of home; re-enactors seldom do. By contributing scenes that rarely play in the theatre of ersatz war, I feel I have increased the verisimilitude of the staged event.



Statement for *The Capilano Review*

Published in the fortieth anniversary issue of *The Capilano Review* 3,
no. 17 (Spring 2012)

As a result of working as a sculptor for many years, I now consider position and status when I look at objects in the world, noting that some enjoy privilege while others are made to serve. Most are filled with aspiration, seeking to win our attention and move through us to a better life. In theory, humans charge things with significance, inflecting them with cultural code. But in reality, the value of objects pre-exists us and is mutable, based on how we find them.

I work with the understanding that inanimate objects constitute human subjects by instigating affect, as they proceed to threaten, please, facilitate, or damage us. In the studio I might rearrange the relationship between things in order to increase their power, or I make adjustments to restore their depleted importance. I always assume that material is co-operative, and process is the way to reach and understand the latent intelligence of things.





Poodles

Written for *Simple Present Future Anterior*, an exhibition
marking the twentieth anniversary of Susan Hobbs Gallery,
February 7–March 16, 2013

I'm sure that all the artists who work with Susan have experienced her ability to provide unusual support for projects and passions. She's concierge-like in her arrangements for securing funding, making donations, or finding a seat sale. She's paralegal in pursuing insurance claims, getting into or out of contracts, and checking the fine print.

I have learned to value her input on both professional and personal matters and absolutely trust her discretion and fairness. More than once I have leaned on her with problems so pathetic that I choose to suppress them from memory. On the occasion of celebrating twenty years of partnership with Susan I involuntarily recall this story.

At some point in the mid-1990s I developed a passion for poodles. Not the big ones with their classy continental cuts, or the tiny toys sitting in teacups. My focus was on the mid-size version, the "French Poodle," called "miniature" by their breeders. This interest was triggered by a Lynda Barry comic strip featuring a poodle with a spikey haircut: "he's small, he's black, he's mad as hell, he's a Poodle with a Mohawk!" and confirmed by a sighting in Trinity Bellwoods Park of a ragged-coated miniature giving the rout to a bruiser of a Rottweiler.

It wasn't until I moved back to Vancouver that my obsession really bit. A fascination with the history of bloodlines led me to pedigree charts which I cross-referenced with listings in the breeder section of dog magazines. Eventually I came to the conclusion that the epicentre of miniature poodle production was in a swath of townships just north of Toronto where two kennels based their breeding program on direct descendants of the American champions of the 1940s. No doubt the inaccessibility of these places honed my imagination as I pictured the rolling hills of Bobcaygeon populated with frolicking, collectible poodles all tricked out like the vintage dogs in the old books.

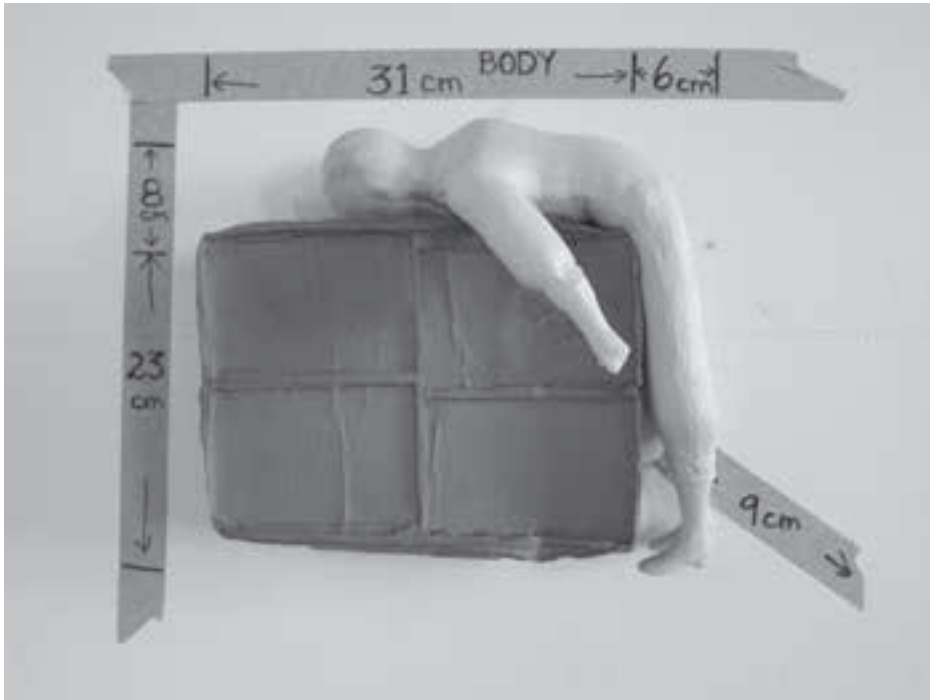
In 1996, on the occasion of my third exhibition at the gallery, I begged Hobbs to help me get up there, just for a look. This was too embarrassing a request to lay at any other door, and even Hobbs sounded worried at the weirdness of it, but she picked me up at the airport and we headed straight to King City in dark, nasty weather. I had contacted a kennel famous for developing a line of "red" dogs and the only one with bloodlines from the original imports from

France. The breeder reluctantly agreed to let us visit at night, no doubt hoping to place one of her less than perfect pups.

In a rural area zoned for acreage we found the house at the end of a long, unlighted driveway. We were ushered in through a door at the side of the building straight into some sort of rumpus room thick with the scent of urine and cluttered with dogs. This room operated as the infirmary/boarding kennel/family room, where old dogs spent their declining years and boarding dogs strained at leashes tied to doorknobs. It was outfitted with two La-Z-Boys, a television set, and a rudimentary kitchenette.

I guess I was expecting something like a tour of a wine cellar, so I knew immediately that this visit was a mistake. As the dogs came to greet us in good poodle fashion I could feel Hobbs pull herself in tight, hoping to avoid contact with the moth-eaten reception line. One old girl had mucky, bug-eyes, and a tongue stuck permanently out of the side of her mouth. All the dogs were geriatric; faded, matted, and ungroomed, skittering across the floor on long horny toenails. Except for a chestnut-coloured dog who appeared young and handsome. He rolled up, staring at us with eyes as white as marble, the victim of a tragic, genetic disease particular to poodles, rendering the afflicted stone blind by the age of three. We were surely in the land of the damned.

I couldn't help Hobbs. I know she is fastidious and this scene was the opposite of that. I was obliged to proceed with the basic requirements of a visit, asking questions and making positive sounds at the story of the breeding program. I remember a nursing dam was brought in from the kennel for my inspection, named Tia Maria. I imagine this was in reference to her liqueur-coloured coat. I was offered a place on the waiting list for one of her pups, sired by Jazzy Jake. I expressed appreciation for this privilege and used the transaction to move Hobbs toward the door. With promises of follow-up we slipped out of the house, ran to her Ford Probe, and locked ourselves in. I loved the smell of vinyl we found there. We were saved.



To Liz Mulholland

Unpublished, November 2015. Liz Mulholland is director and partner at Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York



I'm going to try to put a few thoughts into words, as succinctly as possible, to support the relationship between *Being This* and *Pearl Body*. None of this is backstory that must be presented with the work. I really prefer the opposite, to be flummoxed and confused when I first encounter something. Probably because I'm from the "pre-didactic panel" generation.

Anyhow, here's how I've been thinking:



First of all, for a long time I've been thinking that a body is not a person. That a body only becomes a person through manifold systems of naming; family affiliation; cultural identity; citizenship; ideology; etc. This is great for me; as a sculptor there is an intense material aspect to this layering of association, the body gets covered with badges, the house becomes full of stuff, etc., so I have lots to work with. *Being This* is probably the most concerted effort in that direction. *One Bedroom Apartment* is in the same vein.



At the same time, this build-up of material in the service of naming becomes so thick and unmobile it restricts the imaginative movement of a person. The reaction to this constraint may result in reinforcing it via extreme conservatism (re-enactor photographs) or it may foster a desire to escape the "namers," to retreat into isolation so that the "person" is in charge of their own naming (*Cabin in the Snow*, *Tent*, *Hollow*, *Burrow*, etc.). Sometimes the reaction is a kind of hypermobility; a layering of association and activity that becomes so contradictory that it defies sense and meaning (*Being This*, *Cigarette Girl*). Finally, death is the ultimate separation of body and person, and in that file I would place the bulk of my work. I always want to add that this comes from material and meaning-construction interests, not from sadness or morbidity, but nobody believes me!



Maybe hypermobility is where we are now, culturally speaking. Probably the whole duration of my life has coincided with this idea of identity construction and the primacy of the individual, etc. However, several times I have experienced cracks in the ideology of identity, which I have found to be pretty scary. So I try to imagine the loss of identity through accounts from people who have found themselves in very, very constrained situations: *La Bâtarde* by Violette Leduc; *Our Lady of the Flowers* by Jean Genet; the stories of Paul Bowles and Jane

TO LIZ MULHOLLAND

Bowles. Most recently it's a book called *My Century* by the Polish poet Aleksander Wat. He was in a Stalinist prison for nearly ten years, and he developed very profound ideas on the meaning of the body and the fundamentals of personhood when the body is stripped of its accoutrements.

These small box works came from thinking about Aleksander Wat, and the two body pieces especially. Although I say this with humility and feel the hubris of putting his work and mine in the same sentence.

Best regards,

Liz



Out Here

Published as part of the feature “The Importance of Being an
Influence,” *Mousse Magazine* 52 (February–March 2016)

Out here, on the northwestern coast of North America, it wasn't easy to be influenced by art during the second half of the twentieth century. With an emphasis on practicality and resource exploitation, the incumbent pioneer culture was resistant to "imported" ideas and did a good job of blocking and ridiculing "poetic" tendencies. As a result, we had to be nimble to pick up the "new."

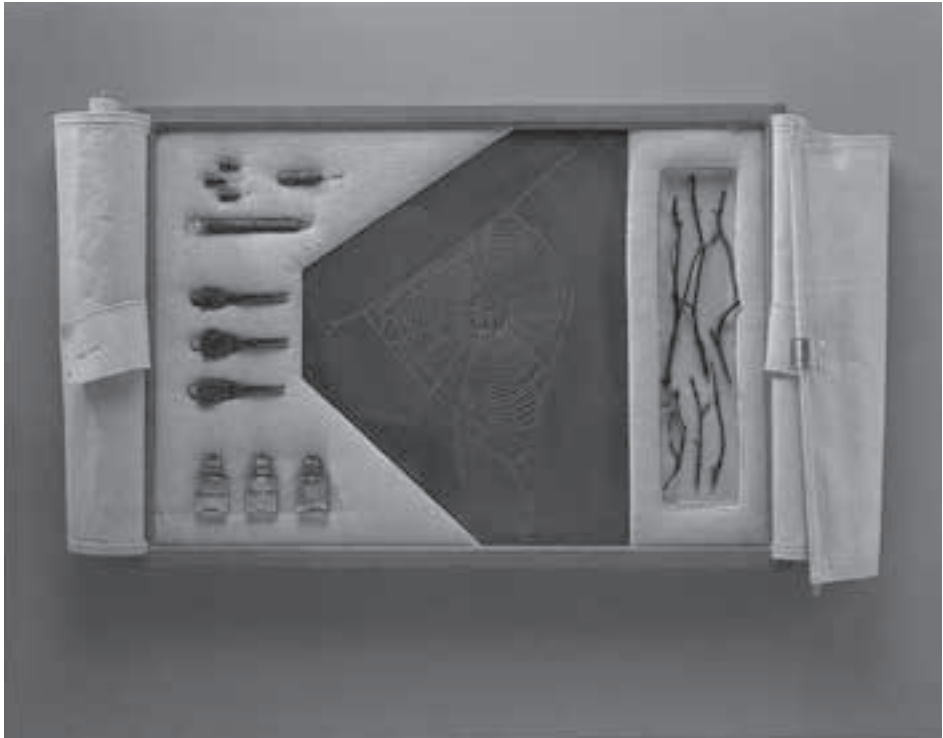
We had to travel, go to talks, convene conferences, and generally do a lot of hanging out, gleaning intelligence from friends and putting things together in bits and pieces. Context made the difference in determining what was worthwhile: Where were you when you heard or saw something? What was the occasion? Who else was there? What did they say? What were you working on? The flow was unregulated. You didn't turn it on in the privacy of your own space and you could never summon exactly what you wanted when you wanted it. Instead, you worked with whatever fell on to your path.

The inefficiency of this form of growth was part of its power. Often it was hard to follow up on stimulating new information. No library had the books we wanted to read and few galleries brought in the things we wanted to see, so when the stars aligned and you were able to apprehend a sculpture or a book or a film that you had only heard about until that moment, the event was stoked by such intense longing for experience that perforce, it would inevitably become an "influence." As a result, my influences are better described as random moments, rather than particular artists, having no obvious connection to one another but each occurring as a fortuitous encounter, arriving as I needed them and providing guidance as to how I might proceed. These moments were thicker in number at the beginning when I had lots of questions. But they still happen.

A partial list of influences:

- The image of the ocean on a picture postcard pinned to the far wall in an unidentified space, present in the last frames of Michael Snow's film *Wavelength*, 1967.
- The exhibition "The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age" curated by Pontus Hultén for the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1968.
- Betty Goodwin's "Tarpaulin" works (1972–74).
- Advice for one's personal life delivered by Agnes Martin at the Vancouver Art Gallery in the early 1970s. She instructed that a serious artist should have no companions, not even pets!
- *The Complete Stories of Franz Kafka*, published in 1971.
- A huge lump of tallow (Joseph Beuys) in the foyer of Museum Monchengladbach, mid-'70s, presented with no attribution or explanation.
- A small photograph of a white dress, with a pattern painted on it, hanging from a tree; collaboration between Robert Gober and Christopher Wool, 1988.
- Rosemarie Trockel's cots for visitors at the German Pavilion of the Venice Biennale, 1999.
- Pina Bausch's piece, *Kontaktstuf*, as seen in Wim Wender's 3D film *Pina*, 2011.

to be continued...



A Conversation with Liz Magor

Published in *Liz Magor*, the catalogue for a retrospective
exhibition at Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal,
June 22–September 5, 2016

LESLEY JOHNSTONE: Your practice traverses a period that has seen the dematerialization and the re-materialization of the art object, a movement away from the studio and the gallery space as sites of production and presentation to post-studio practices, and more recently a reaffirmation of the studio and a revival of interest in materials and making. You have maintained a studio-based practice for over forty years, and I'm wondering to what degree the studio has allowed you to both engage with and retreat from the world.

LIZ MAGOR: This will seem like a long, digressive answer. But maybe that's the great advantage of an exhibition like this: it's a chance to reflect on what is generally taken for granted. My social identity has always felt emergent. There are obvious reasons for this; my parents came to Vancouver in the 1940s from Montreal and the Ottawa Valley, so my extended family—like many people's—was distant. On the West Coast, all non-Aboriginals are recent arrivals. So apart from First Nations, there are no old or established families here that you might emulate or take instruction from. In my childhood the industries here were primary, and essentially rural. There was no strong architectural, material or manufacturing culture, and there was only one university for miles in any direction. In addition, the second wave of feminism began as I was maturing into an adult, making me distrustful of both my education and the social structures that predominated at the time.

All this lack of grounding is a perfect recipe for self-invention—that's the beauty of pioneer culture. On the other hand, without a model to refer to it's easy to get lost or feel detached and without social purpose. Finding guidance was hard for me. As a teenager I was a big reader. Searching, but not finding. Plus, reading is for the head. I wanted a life that included my body and, by extension, the things that I found around me, that co-existed with my body in the same time and place. So I migrated from the word to the visible, from the idea to the thing. It was a slow process and the studio was the site for that change.

By now I'm dependent on the real space of the studio to actively study the world. Looking isn't enough. I need to alter things as a way of tracking and comprehending the nascent qualities of the materials and processes that form the objects in the world. Since all these things are socially inflected in the first place, it's as if I bring the world into the studio in bits and pieces.

JOHNSTONE: The other important site for you, of course, is the humble retail outlet—the thrift shops and dollar stores that provide you with a multitude of *things*, which are then transformed, cast, moulded, enhanced, or combined with other made or found objects. Can you speak about the relationships you set up between the found, the bought, the transformed, and the made?

MAGOR: For my purposes, objects can be divided into two categories: those that are provided by the world, and those that I provide by making them in the studio. I started making things as a child simply as a way to make up for the deficiency of what was offered. I found most things around me to be practical, unbeautiful, and meaningless. I needed things to be emotionally charged and personal, almost equivalent to me in terms of subjectivity. I literally populated an invented world: puppets with big eyes and lots of costume changes; little clay sculptures of human figures in anguish; dogs in postures of devotion; horses running free. Lots of drama.

A bit later, I guess as a teenager, I made things that were intended to catapult me into experience: elaborate pet habitats for turtles, rabbits, or birds; a leather jacket copied from one worn by Paul McCartney's girlfriend (as seen in a photograph); funny hats made from old fur coats; special, weird tools; and a pair of wire rimmed eyeglasses for myself, even though my eyesight was 20/20.

All this industry morphed into art-making without any clear transition. The *Bird Nest Kits* and *Sowing Weeds in Lanes and Ditches* from the 1970s carry some of the same dramatic burden as early things that I didn't call art, but they came with a new intention to establish distance between the work and myself. I disliked the emotional stew involved in being directly personal, so I developed narrative conceits that allowed the work to emerge from those invented places.

From one point of view, making art is a way of testing the positions one might take relative to the world, and the people and things found in the world. The materials, the images, the operations, the forms of address, they all come from an inventory of possibilities and I'm conscious of my choices. By now I have an enhanced ability to make things, but a diminished need for those things to speak symbolically or profoundly. Now I'm spending hours making the things I used

to find unbeautiful and meaningless—a pile of towels, a stack of trays, a discarded jacket, a cardboard box—and setting them up in relationship to found things. My interest is how the studio part affects the found part. Through some mysterious operation the found things become really alive when set against the sculptural representation of something ordinary.

JOHNSTONE: What is it that draws you to the everyday, humble, and the banal, and less to the exotic or the luxurious?

MAGOR: Everything outside of me is literally exotic, and therefore has the ability to supply strangeness and stimulate curiosity. Many things are humble but nothing is banal. I began working as a means of self-location and continue to work that way, believing there is an exchange between myself and the things around me. We provide meaning for each other in a way that isn't true for things that are known but not experienced.

And maybe I simply like the less competitive situation of working with things that aren't exciting and new. There is no clamour around the outmoded, the cheesy, or the exhausted. So I can take my time looking at how they operate and how they can be positioned to form a relationship with us.

JOHNSTONE: Serial repetition is fundamental to your practice, first manifested in the lead multiples cast from a single mould. In placing side by side a number of works made from a single mould of a jacket, a tray, a pile of towels, or a leather glove, which are later made distinct through the integration of mass-produced objects, you complicate the whole notion of identity. Has your thinking about identity (your own as an artist, but also identity as a philosophical concept) changed over the years, and is your use of the multiple a way of investigating identity through material difference?

MAGOR: I'm sure my feelings about identity have changed, but probably not in any remarkable way. Perhaps they are simply typical of a person maturing into an understanding that as individuals we are not that unique or special. In fact, I was testing my tolerance for repetition and sameness before the lead works. *Four Boys and a Girl* consists of five slabs of pressed material alongside the machine that

pushed them out. *Production* followed that with a machine that pressed out four bricks at a time the until there was an inventory of thousands. I wanted to set up a tension between the producer and its product, to transfer importance from the single thing to the many. *Double Scarp*, *Four Notable Bakers*, *The Most She Weighed / The Least She Weighed*, *The Most Notable Difference*, *Regal Decor*—even the *Bird Nest Kits*—all exercise this wish to get past the idea of specialness, to give up the reverence for the unique and the singular.

So I admit to a very concerted interest in getting free of a particular mindset, and I've used the work to try out different positions. In terms of my own understanding I've changed, but I'm not sure I've made much personal progress. While I was digging away at all this back in the 1980s, I learned that the words "stereotype" and "cliché" were both borrowed from mechanical printing processes in the nineteenth century. So the horror of having an identity that is not unique is persistent and tightly woven into our manufacturing, economic, and social ideas. Maybe in more recent work I've shifted the inquiry to examine how the primacy of this notion of individuality is maintained.

JOHNSTONE: Do you consider yourself to be a feminist artist?

MAGOR: Definitely and absolutely, I'm a feminist, there's no doubt about it. I bought Germaine Greer's book *The Female Eunuch* when it was published in 1970 and read it in one sitting. I was twenty-two at the time and I was ignorant, angry, and confused. Somehow, I had missed Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, and I couldn't figure out why it was so difficult for me to go forward into a productive life. I'd been to three different post-secondary institutions and dropped out of all of them not knowing whether it was me or the school that was wrong. *The Female Eunuch* stunned me because the problems that I thought were my own, as in "my own fault," were contextualized as being socially constructed and historically maintained. It was like receiving a diagnosis for a mysterious and debilitating condition. I was deeply shocked; speechless. But at the same time, it ignited a drive in me and opened up desperately needed alternatives.

Because of my late introduction to a feminist view, I've always felt more a beneficiary of the ideas than a contributor. For me, feminism is a fluid proposition, not an ideology, and I use it as a way to work

as opposed to making it the subject of work. I think that a feminist reading of the work would be unfruitful, or at best, full of inconsistency. In fact, feminism has given me permission to be unsure, as well as digressive, unapologetic, and unauthoritative. It has helped me valorize detail, entertain the small stories and eschew the need to be at the front, or on top of, an art movement. In other words, I am feminist, while the work isn't particularly so.

JOHNSTONE: I'm intrigued by the apparent difference between the works you made while you were living in Toronto and those you've made since you moved back to Vancouver. How much have these cities and their art communities influenced the way you make and think about your work?

MAGOR: I moved to Toronto in 1980. I was pretty young as an artist, and I needed to learn more. There were some interesting artists there who were doing installation work, and since Vancouver was turning its attention to photography and art history it seemed like a good time to leave. I expected that I would continue with my quasi-narrative investigations and find a way to expand and complicate them. I had started making work with literature as a guide. I admired writers who could capture metaphysical and social conditions in short, sharp pieces—like Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, Mavis Gallant, Joan Didion, and James Baldwin—but I was becoming comfortable with the fluctuation of meaning that is inherent in images.

So I moved to Toronto to facilitate that development, not realizing that a huge shift was under way as the influence of critical theory was about to overwhelm the city. It was an enormous force, like a big wave that washed over everything. Conventional art-making kind of stalled, making way for discussions, arguments really, as to how society should be reformed and what the role of the artist would be. Although the questions were important and the movement toward institutional critique was widespread, the focus was strangely narrow and terribly ideological. Everyone referred to the same books and writers, and had the same horror of beauty or digression or playfulness. There were many panel discussions with guests like Benjamin Buchloh and Craig Owens. At one of those events I witnessed a curator scold Chantal Akerman for not speaking more aggressively about the importance of feminism. It was horrifying. It seemed to me that the only things

that could get through that tight filter were pictures and words. Literal pictures and earnest words.

To be honest, I'm earnest enough to try the high-minded approach myself, and some of my work from that period feels stilted to me now. I was excited about learning—semiotics, feminism, phenomenology, ideas from the Frankfurt School—but probably not much processing took place before I dumped the stuff into a work. Thankfully, I didn't produce a lot. I knew I was unprepared.

So I just slowed down and used the time to improve my education. With the focus on wanting to understand how art operates, I could absorb more than I ever did in university. Also, I was teaching one day a week at OCAD, and I would spend the better part of the week preparing an illustrated lecture based on something I had discovered or an artist I wanted to learn more about: Richard Serra, Cindy Sherman, Chris Marker. Gradually my scope widened and I could begin to corral the things that were important to me, specifically the relation of a subject to the objective world and the indistinct boundaries and confusions that ensue from that meeting. Also, I wanted to be responsible for the observation of those processes, not to be reliant on an intellectual authority. I was no longer afraid of being "wrong." If I learned anything in Toronto, it's that anyone can be proven wrong by someone else's deft argument.

That's how I spent the decade. Eventually I felt a need to remove myself from theoretical discussion to retreat. The dense learning period was over. I needed to do something about it. So when other things in my life started pointing in the same direction, I began the move home, to Vancouver.

JOHNSTONE: And yet when you returned to Vancouver, the art milieu was steeped in what has been termed the Vancouver School of conceptual photography, articulated by Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace among others, and totally grounded in critical theory and art history, and here you were going back to Vancouver to remove yourself from theory.

MAGOR: It's true that Vancouver had its own set of rules with regard to how art should operate, but by the time I got back to the coast I

was relatively immune to those imperatives. Toronto had inoculated me for sure. But in addition, I had been through a difficult couple of years due to a controversy that blew up around my *Field Work* portfolio. In 1989 I found some black-and-white photographs that I had taken twenty years earlier, in the late 1960s. These were simple pictures of my friends as we explored life on the land: camping, fishing, canoeing, cooking in the open, etc. I was surprised at the naivety and romantic drive that were invisible to us in our youth but so obvious twenty years after the fact. So I printed them with some of the titles from Edward Curtis's photogravures from earlier in the century. He too was a romantic and used images of Indigenous people to entertain his ahistorical notions. Anyhow, what I had intended as an exposure of a recurring and enduring folly, others saw as a case of cultural appropriation, and I was pulled up on the carpet and treated to a big correction. Which I took seriously, by the way. I was very chastened by the experience and I spent a good part of the 1990s reviewing the situation and considering my options. I tried contextualizing the *Field Work* portfolio by making a number of photographic works based on historical re-enactors. But overall, I felt that I wasn't strong enough to be an artist.

I've had a connection to the coastal islands since the 1960s. I've lived in cabins, on boats, off the grid, etc. Coastal culture is unique, beautiful, and very complex, and I entertained going that route. My move back to Vancouver was synonymous with dropping out of art, so whatever the Vancouver discourse was in the 1990s it made no impression on me. I was looking in another direction entirely.

JOHNSTONE: For this exhibition we've tried to tease out connections between works that were made years apart, rather than organizing it chronologically. What kinds of issues arose as we worked through the selection of works? Have new connections emerged? How do you see the earliest works in the exhibition relating to the most recent pieces?

MAGOR: Being self-conscious while I'm working is not a good idea. If I think it's "me" that's working, I just want to stop. So I try to set up the terms and then let the work kind of make itself. This absolutely cancels out any possibility of looking back. It has to be coming from this moment. Even to make a work that is very similar to a previous

work is less fluid, less good. So I work in an area until I've tried everything connected to that territory, and by then I really have no interest in revisiting the thing analytically. I proceed to the next work using the slimmest excuse or connection to what I've just finished and wade into a whole new batch of unknowns and problems.

But this aversion to self-consciousness is mostly limited to the manifestation or the form or the material aspect of a work. In subjective terms, it seems I do nothing but ruminate and repeat. I go over the same emotional ground again and again as though I'll never figure it out. Probably I don't expect to but am trying to bring the inside out for a closer look. I use the work to engage with a cluster of questions about existence and value. In this sense it's been very consistent over the years in how it operates for me, but perhaps jumpy in how it appears.

JOHNSTONE: Can I ask you to elaborate on what I perceive as highly resonant relationships between a work such as *Production*, from 1980, and the very recent polymer casts of found cardboard boxes including *Good Shepherd* and *Membership*? As installed, *Production* is a wall or room made out of thousands of bricks which you fabricated by soaking newspapers in water and pressing them through a machine of your own making. In the new works you have manipulated the inside of found boxes, then sprinkled iridescent pigments onto their surfaces and cast the boxes to create free-standing sculptures that are then "dressed" with clothing, animals, or other found materials. *Production* is clearly about the value of labour, and the new works are also about value, but perhaps of a different kind.

MAGOR: I only recognize these relationships because we are pulling the old work out for consideration. But I have to admit that I'm surprised and maybe relieved to see them, hoping they signal some kind of depth or endurance of my point of view. I know that I've maintained the political beliefs of my generation, with its interest in civil rights and liberties, but I've never expected my work to be instructive to others on these issues. Instead, I've asked it to instruct itself, or better yet, instruct me on ways to stay intellectually and emotionally fluid. So I don't ask the work to address issues, but to be in a *position* to address issues. A thing has to *be* something before it can be *about* something. To that end, I try in the studio to perform

the inquiry in a different way each time, coming at the same question but from a different angle: What if there's more system and rigour? What if there's a narrative drive? What if there's more feeling? How does the scale work? Where does the thing rest or sit?

It's not about topics, it's about operations. I don't have a formula as to what makes art happen, but I think that when it does, it makes it more possible to be idealistic.

JOHNSTONE: Can you speak about your apparent aversion to the plinth as a way of presenting your sculpture? The cast cardboard boxes serve as the "supports" for animals, clothing, objects, and function in much the same way as the cast tables and trays in early works.

MAGOR: Sculpture has a problematic relationship with gravity. It has no obvious way to hold itself up: from the ground up, from the floor up, from the table up. So this has to be figured out every time. Unlike painting, sculpture connects to the world in a deliberate way, and I regard this connection as a big deal. I like how it delivers art into a zone that's co-extensive with that of my body and the other objects in the area because it shares our support surface. I'm loath to interrupt this co-dependence with a contrivance like a plinth, so sometimes I go in the opposite direction and make the sculpture be the support, for something that's not a sculpture.

JOHNSTONE: Death seems to be something you grapple with a lot. Or is it perhaps an anxiety that emerges from an exploration of presence and absence, which translates into an engagement with death?

MAGOR: Presence/absence is a problem that the mind has to negotiate. When an attachment is formed, it's quite a hard job to detach if something substantial changes, when the material disappears but the image lingers on. When bodies fail we call it death. When materials fail we call it corrosion or deflation or disintegration.

Materials and intentions go through the equivalent of a life cycle—starting from nothing developing into a very full something, failing, and then fading into memory. The studio is a good place to see death as a change of state. Maybe that's the reason for the found things in a sculpture: the cigarette, the toy dog, the candies, seem so much

more alive than the studio-produced part. The found components have the potential to return to the world and resume their business. There's a tension in that possibility. Whereas the sculpture parts have met their destiny. It's finished for them. Even a dead bird is more alive than the replica of a cardboard box.

JOHNSTONE: A related question concerns the way that you render absence present through materials. There are very few human bodies represented (except in the photographs). Do you conceive of the clothes, blankets, furniture, food, packaging, animals, etc. as representing absent beings?

MAGOR: Perhaps the narrative structure of some of the work suggests the possibility of a protagonist. Most narrative fiction is organized around human characters—their relationships and struggles—and as a culture, we are very people-focused. So the image of a building, especially a cabin, like the one in *Messenger*, might appear to be missing an occupant. But I don't see it that way at all. When I'm out in the world looking at things, I look past the people and see their accoutrements, their buildings, their accessories and implements. When I see a movie or a play, I'm clocking the sets, the costumes, the props. There is a population of things that exists in concert with the population of people, and the choreography between the two is so synchronized that it's difficult to determine who or what is directing the action. If there is an absence, it's the absence of recognizing the relationship between subject and object. If I don't provide a subject and instead deliver a surfeit of material, the role of subject is left open, as yet unfilled. This is very different from absence—it's perhaps more about waiting, or expectation.

JOHNSTONE: And what of your own presence?

MAGOR: I count myself as present when I'm looking at art.

In this culture we have a lot of access to subjectivity. I don't need more people. What I need is an understanding of the meeting or interface of subjectivity with the material world. I know that my mind charges the world with significance. I don't know if that's innate, the product of some function in the brain, or whether it's learned, but I'm aware of the incessant operation of meaning-making I'm engaged in, the

constant apprehension and interpretation of everything I see or encounter. It's exhausting really, and strangely unsatisfying. The drive to name and understand and rationalize actually results in the opposite of meaning, because of the unrelenting arrival of new material.

I need to find the equivalent of the mind in the things that are around me so that I can rest, leave my mind in things, let go of ideas, and take a break.

JOHNSTONE: Language plays a large role in your practice, through writing and the making of artist's books. But you also pay a lot of attention to the labels, to logos and specific brands, highlighting them through minor interventions, pointing to them, through the titles, etc. What is the significance of language for you?

MAGOR: Reading has always been important to me. English is so huge and complex and beautiful—I can easily read for pleasure, no guilt. But I also read for self-discovery, to locate myself as either a particular type of person or as a human in general. I can still be shocked at how brilliant some writing is and how it's able to capture the metaphysical aspects of a life. It might be this awareness that makes me reluctant to use (real) writing in my work. I try to find titles that are straightforward, though not programmatic, and certainly never poetic! All my books are pedestrian in their use of language, or eschew it altogether. Sometimes I'll use a scrap of something with a word on it, for example in *Being This* there are lots of logos and printed things on the clothing, but I treat them as if they are up for grabs in terms of meaning. Labels and logos are sort of a hinge between word and image. They operate on the principle that images constitute a language that is as powerful as the written word. Of course it's a small step from image to object and material, which again are a form of speech.





Comment with
Regard to the
Sculptural
Work *Cupped*

Unpublished, January–February 2017

Cupped is a sculpture that performs a service. In the interest of providing support and solace it is posed, in continual readiness, to contain the effect of a nervous habit.

To install; light a cigarette, any brand or type. As it burns hold it over the sculpture and flick the ashes from the burning cigarette into the cupped palms of the gloves. When the cigarette has burned two-thirds of the way down, extinguish the ember by spotting it with a small brush loaded with water. It will take one or two spots of water. Put this wet spot on the underside of the cigarette where the paper has a seam. Then place the spent cigarette in the holder, seamside down, on the thumb of the glove, as pictured in an installation photograph.





To Ask Sheila Heti

An unpublished May 2018 message to author Sheila Heti asking her to contribute an essay to the catalogue for *BLOWOUT*, an exhibition commissioned by the Carpenter Center for Visual Arts at Harvard University, January 31–March 24, 2019, and the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, April 27–June 23, 2019

It's not that I disdain fiction. Sometimes a writer can conjure images in my mind's eye with such subtle manipulation of my consciousness that the effect is similar to doing drugs: transporting, mood-altering, all of that. I recognize the skill and intelligence needed to pull this off. I can also see the beauty of the work and feel the pleasure of the art.

But often I'm not receptive to the invitation. I don't want to submit. I feel the writer is baiting me with exotica while trying to set a hook in my mouth. I don't have time for this, to be pulled out of my life into a fabrication involving some other place in some other time, concerning people that don't exist and perhaps never existed, even as a type.

Instead, what is pertinent to me is to note what is going on here, in my emotional life, on this day, with the people near me right now. I'm not assuming that we are so original, or special. But I am convinced that our particular experience has not been described or represented and therefore we are without a model for understanding ourselves. We have symbolic tools for symbolic selves, but very little for encountering the "real." As a consequence we are ignorant of our choices and numb to our experience.

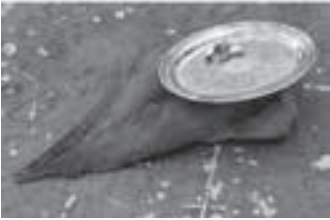
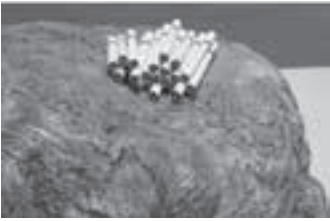
I am interested in writers who eschew the conventional operations of fiction in search of emergent feeling; writers who are willing to foster a "story" that may not wrap up by the end of the book, who are neither omniscient nor unreliable narrators, who might use the material of a real life in its raw state with little fictional manipulation. I regard the found story for a writer as being equivalent to the found object for a visual artist.

In particular, I'm interested in how the found form presents itself as full and empty at the same time. Full because of the relentless production of "meaning" and empty because of the persistent avoidance of feeling. It is not pertinent to say "I love this thing because it was my grandmother's" as the thing in itself is then lost and unloved; known only by reference, not experience.

I suspect that the studio of a writer is not dissimilar to that of a sculptor in terms of the questions posed. To test the comparison, my question to a writer is simply, what means are used to empty a narrative of its ostensible subject in order to let it fill with its latent subject?

Stonecroft Lecture

The 2018 Stonecroft Lecture at the National Gallery of Canada,
Ottawa, November 8, 2018



It seems that I spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about cigarettes. This preoccupation isn't triggered by physical craving; I don't have much experience of smoking and have no habit driving me. It might come from the movies, in spite of all efforts to squelch it I still like to see characters light up. But I think it comes more from an appreciation of the body of the cigarette itself with its delicate and brilliant design. How beautiful are these fibrous cylinders? Starting with their neat insertion into a small box, so tightly packed that it renders them square. How do they get in there without damage? Flip the top of the box and admire the regimented white-tipped filters. Observe their emergence from the pack, one at a time, in stepped sequence, filter first, white shaft following. Then notice how comfortably the chosen one fits between two fingers, no weight at all, easy to balance. Between the lips it's a bit different, exerting a downward pull but manageable with the mouth muscles concentrated into a small circle, or wagging up and down on the lips of a talkative smoker. Inserted like a plug in a hole or a baton keeping score; in either case this consensual union with a human body is the ultimate event in the life of a cigarette.

We may want to quit cigarettes, but cigarettes don't want to quit us.

Think of blankets. Big woven sheets that capture and conserve the body's heat. A human invention at least as brilliant as the wheel.

Think of a soft sweater, angora perhaps, whose feathery nap notices and attends to your skin as no human can.

Think of shoes. Not only do they forestall a stubbed toe or punctured footpad, but the sound they make on the earth's hard surface is exciting; a horse-like clop; a regimented rap; a cute clickety click or a lazy flap and slap. I like a stealthy sole myself, but I'm not beyond enjoying the costume of a pair of shoes that can make me feel more vulnerable than I am or, in the opposite direction, turn me into a tank able to drive over any surface with impunity. Years ago, I had a pair of green shoes with a low heel that made me feel like Donald Duck's wife, Daisy. It was a proportion thing, when a bird-like ankle emerged from an overly wide platform. Roomy enough for a webbed foot. It sounds bad, but I liked it. It was like putting a character mask on my feet and assuming a role. Face-mask, foot-mask, arm-mask, chest-mask.

Think of chest-masks. I mean blouses. And jackets.

Think of bags; handbags, carry bags. Accomplices to our crimes of collecting.

When I say something like that, “crimes of collecting,” I wince at the moral tone of the words. I don’t like how it condemns all acts of “bringing things home” to the status of an offence. For the same reason I try to avoid the term “consumerism,” finding it sloppy and general and judgmental. But if my interest as an artist is in locating the source of emotional unease, a twitchy feeling that feels like anxiety, or guilt, I can often trace it back to material; my body and how I neglect it. The earth and how I waste it. The stream of things that pass through my hands and come out damaged, dirty, and discarded. The flip side of the thrill of new things is the dullness of their persistence. They just won’t go away. Not only do things accumulate underfoot, they get old and they fall apart.

For several years, in the 1990s I attended the events of historical re-enactors. I liked how they operated their clothing and tools as time machines, I admired their appreciation of obsolete materials and technology. One lucky day, at Sailor’s Creek State Park, Virginia, I joined a party of Civil War “officers” as they enjoyed a supper of re-enacted food. For re-enactors nothing actually ages or deteriorates. They are masters of zombie-ism. They know how to turn a new thing into “old” and then hold it there for a frozen moment. When they are shot in battle, they lie down for five minutes and then get up. When they have their portrait taken they present their modern body to a Mathew Brady mimic and walk away with an “old” body printed on antique glass.

For this evening meal at Sailor’s Creek the men spread out vintage glass jars containing pickled vegetables, spruce beer, and canned venison, all prepared according to historical recipes. Seated at a folding campaign table in a large canvas tent they ate from old metal plates using bent and tarnished cutlery. Even their uniforms were time-defiant, tailored from cloth woven in the terms of the 1850s, tricked out with authentic paraphernalia, buttons, and insignia. Stuff-wise they had it nailed. Human-wise they were less convincing. Their attempts to converse in the accent and vernacular of their hobby-time

was awkward as they were unused to the courtly sounds coming out of their mouths. Weirdly short of team spirit and pertinent conversation they seemed stunned by the mirage they had conjured. Their sentences came out in jerky bits leaving long silences with all eyes glued to the place settings as though they envied the material scene that proceeded without them. They came across as deeply stoned, in thrall to some interior script which was directed by their things, leaving their bodies redundant and paralyzed.

One problem I have noticed with such privileging of appearance is the disparity between the imagined and the real. Appearance is unsubstantial, emanating from the object like an aura, energized by the user's narrative. In the unmeasurable space between the thing as it is and the thing that appears, all laws of physics are suspended. The weight, the mass, the volume, are nothing. The body is nothing. In its place lies pure potential. A promise of knowledge that is beyond fact. A place where subjective truth rules.

Those two words are uncomfortable together, subjective and truth, but, if my interest is emotional discomfort, it's a good place for me to focus.

I'll bring anything into the studio, any material, object, or fragment that catches my eye. Literally, my hand reaches for the thing that my eye wants without questioning its worthiness or meaning. I have to notice it, that's all. Let the questions come later. Most of what is brought in has no overt connection to my life. None of it reminds me of my parents or my childhood. None of it looks like something my grandmother owned. In fact, in the studio it's not pertinent to say "I love this thing because it was my mother's" as the thing itself is then lost and unloved; known only by reference, nor do I choose things of cultural significance, recognized aesthetic charm or collectability. Instead I look for forms presenting themselves as full and empty at the same time. Full, thanks to the relentless production of "meaning" within a culture, and empty due to the persistent failure of things to hold on to those intentions.

The full/empty thing is a consolation prize. It comes to you when your arm can't quite stretch far enough to nab the golden perfect thing placed way up there on the top shelf. Even a little Ikea steppy

stool won't help you reach it. You can see it but just can't reach it. So you take something from a lower shelf as a placeholder for the real deal, which will come when you improve your reach. In the meantime, you can attach any story you want to this thing. No one will do a DNA test to see if the story and the thing are related. You can keep the story and replace the thing at will. In fact, the vast majority of manufactured things fail to find a permanent home in the heart of a person or a people. They are contenders in a brutal competition for our affection, plucked, full of promise, from the retail shelf in response to an obscure need. At first they float, sailing past everything else on the strength of their new texture or predictable colour. The fresh one is the favoured thing; picked up and held, shown to friends, taken out for excursions. Eventually, the new thing sinks to the level of all the stuff that arrived weeks or years before, finally becoming part of the pile on the floor, the clutter in the closet or the mess on the counter. The next move is out, a heap of bags taken away by car and van. Lexus, Subaru, Toyota, Jeep; conveyors themselves all doomed to replacement, shuttle around in denial heaving up their cargo to ignoble back doors and drop off stations.



The studio is a quiet place. The things I bring there are fidgety at first but settle down as I study them. I have no tool, no magnifying glass or X-ray machine. I can just see the surface of the thing, with glimpses of how it was put together. Even with full knowledge of how it was manufactured I'm often at a loss as to why it was made in the first place. What call came from the people for such a strained thing, such a useless thing? And a lot of it is ugly, so dismissible! At least that's my first impression, these are such nothing things. Such poor things. But if I take a page from the re-enactors, who essentially dial things back



so that they can force their way into a book that was closed long ago, I can do the same to non-remarkable things. If I slow time down I can easily see what the original dream was; the idea of luxury or status or agency that these objects were meant to confer on their owner. I can also see how they miss their target. Generally speaking, it's simply a failure of material, back to that sticking point; plastic is not leather. If I were a proper re-enactor I would fix this problem. I would peel back the kitsch and replace it with researched authenticity. I would make that shoe from hide taken off a deer I have shot myself. But the reason I'm not a re-enactor is that I don't like the consequence of such strict restoration. I appreciate the authentic object, but I don't want to use it as bait in the trap of repetition that historical orthodoxy sets.

So what can I do? What do I want to do? I want to restore a range of emotion to these sad things, in order to ameliorate the passionless desire that created them in the first place. As a plough digs a furrow on a smooth field, as a boat splits the water with its bow, as a bullet bores a hole through flesh, so does the sharpness of desire slice through the stability of the material world. On the loose is a force so relentless and cunning that even those wielding it are unaware of the disturbance that ensues. In manufacturing, desire generates a tsunami of effort: resources gleaned from animal, vegetable, mineral; research; product development; the arrangement of financing and labour; the packaging; the shipping; the advertising and promotion. All that, for what?

It is clear that we don't care. That our desire is without passion. That we are without love. I can't honestly say that I will redeem these things through love. I don't think I can love these awful clothes and cheap shoes. I don't want a blanket full of holes on my bed. But as an artist I can change the story. I don't have to use things as intended. I can put them into new contexts that will reveal their latent qualities or give them a different role. If I ignore the typical "subject uses object" relationship I can make sculpture with one part caring for another part, and arrange for material to know material. I can give objects agency or allow them to be disinterested in us; turn their faces to the wall, house them in sealed boxes and obscure pouches. I can take the human out of the story to mount a theatre of things. I can avoid the re-enactment of my poorly constructed self and the myth that I am made by things.



On an Eight-Sided Tlingit Box

Published in *It Speaks to Me: Art that Inspires Artists*, ed. Jori Finkel
(New York: Prestel, 2019)

There nothing I love more in the world than the bentwood boxes of the West Coast people. They are so simple and beautiful, made out of a single piece of wood that is folded like paper, like origami. The artist would make a chamfer cut at each corner—a kind of angled groove that takes the bulk out of the wood, and then fold it there. The last corner is held by stitching or pegs. The bottom is a separate piece of wood and can be thicker because it doesn't have to fold.

These boxes are always made out of cedar because it's lightweight and has such a long fibre that you can fold it without it cracking. I suppose the technology of wooden boats and barrels is similarly marvelous, but the ingenious design of these boxes maintains a tension that includes the possibility of them springing back to their original plank form.

This eight-sided Tlingit box must have been especially challenging to make, with twelve corners created from a single four-foot-long plank. Eight corners fold in and four fold out. It's basically two boxes with a short channel running between them, probably fashioned for some kind of draining or separating job. It's not very big. Maybe it was used for juicing berries or collecting the liquor from clams or mussels. I don't think much about its practical implications apart from the fact that it's able to hold liquid.

More persistently, I think about its Siamese twinness, how the two boxes that make up this object are yoked together in a kind of forced interdependence. Each box is almost solo except for the fact of the channel that punctures one of its sides, allowing the contents of one to slip into the volume of the other. This soft boundary is a vexed thing: it's hard to know if it's an intrusion or an opportunity, a disability or an innovation.

Wilson Duff, a brilliant anthropologist who taught in Vancouver in the '70s, proposed that some art of the Coastal people, who didn't have written language, could be regarded as a form of visual philosophy.¹ In addition to being practical tools or spiritual statements, these objects posit the mutability and coexistence of opposites: top and bottom, back and front, inside and outside, life and death. He saw them as puzzles of physics and philosophy, and I'm sure that his writing influenced me when I first saw this paradox of a box. It's both a practical thing and a profound thing at one and the same time.

1

Curator and anthropologist, 1925–1976. Author of *The Indian History of British Columbia*, volume 1 (1964), *Arts of the Raven: Masterworks by the Northwest Coast Indians* (1967), and *Images Stone: B.C.* (1975).



Buckle

Written in October 2019 for Frac (Fonds régional d'art contemporain) Île-de-France to accompany the 2016 work *Buckle*

When I have occasion to talk about a work, I tend to avoid, as much as possible, any discussion of what the work is about. I find the approach to such a primary question to be blocked and inaccessible as though a wall has formed between myself and the finished thing. In effect I've lost the memory of why I undertook the work in the first place and, instead of recalling a motivating idea, I'm more likely to launch into an account of the formation of the work—what the materials are and how they behave. I'm comfortable with this sort of information and find it easily retrievable.

In the case of *Buckle*, I'm thinking of wet corrugated cardboard. I'm familiar with how water affects the paper, destroying its structural integrity and allowing it to slump, on its way to becoming sloppy and informal. I'm aware of this as a type of failure as the flat sheet becomes a wave and the function of protective container is lost along with its rectangular form.

I can also recall the appeal of stuffed toy animals. A pile of Siberian tigers in a shop, offered in three sizes but as yet unemployed. Small, medium, large. All waiting for shoppers to recognize their noble referent and appreciate their willingness to carry a narrative burden.

These things; the wet box and the unwanted toy are just two members of a vast league of losers. There must be millions, if not trillions, of manufactured forms which find themselves either past their prime or unrealized in their potential, yet still standing by. So they lie around in the world, in heaps, in storage, on shelves, in boxes, waiting for the next step in their career.

The next step might be as components in a sculpture. Perhaps these two can reimagine themselves. If the box is arrested in its buckling at the knees, it can offer its remaining right angle as a shelf. If the toy finds a position, including a feline posture, it can occupy the shelf with purpose.

Finally, action.

BUCKLE





What Does
Ambition Look
Like, And What
Form Does
Failure Take?

Written and published for Andrew Kreps Gallery, Art Basel
Miami Beach, December 5–8, 2019

What does ambition look like, and what form does failure take? Looking at material as it intersects with ideas and action proves that things are not our valued belongings but simply un-nimble shape-holders. As we move from urgent moment to urgent moment, our jackets and shoes, cars, cups, appliances, toys, houses, handbags, and hats get stuck, unable to keep up. They fall to the side. The things we work with and use to extend our influence have merely a moment of pertinence before they shift from celebration to obsolescence.

Perhaps this isn't tragic. It could be that all this stuff is playing the long game, willing to lie low for decades in order to fetch up, years later, as markers along our zig-zag track of hubris. As our strength wanes and our ambition to impress the world fades and flattens, the things we have long forgotten remain; beaten, bent, and discarded, but persistent, and stubbornly real.

We could use them as mementos or unwieldy souvenirs, but this is a chance for new combinations, wherein thing seeks like-minded thing. An overused story of origin can be abandoned in favour of the immanent and imagined. It turns out that these objects have their own aspiration, and so, as they act in consort, what was latent may now be revealed.

WHAT DOES AMBITION LOOK LIKE, AND WHAT FORM DOES FAILURE TAKE?





Entertaining the Contradiction

Written for Catriona Jeffries, Art Basel Miami Beach,
June 17–20, 2020. The fair was held online due to COVID-19

My abiding interest in sculpture is how it re-enacts or replicates the relationship between inanimate material and human emotion. With no assumption that this is a simple operation I have looked for objects, materials, and forms that are employed as overt manifestations of barely discernable human subjective response. In the early years, as I was figuring out how art might work, I was also learning how to live in a non-urban environment as part of a land co-op situated on a remote island on the west coast of British Columbia.

In this scaled-down social situation the relationship of material to subjectivity was very direct. Resources were harvested from the place we found ourselves and we learned to live with what we had. Within this value system I recognized that the territory was littered with significant artifacts including the remains of wildlife and the relics of early settlement. In *Hutch* (1976) I pulled together the drama of natural history with the architectural remnants of a rough and hasty coastal culture, positing the combination as the real source of historic tension and narrative.

Twenty years later I was reconciled to existence in densely populated places but still concerned about how difficult it is to be human and estranged from nature. *Sleeping Bag* (1999) is a retreat for a threatened psyche offering a bed, or a shroud, in which a body may lie in concealment breathing through air holes cut in the face plate. Domestic textiles like patterned bedsheets and blankets are welded to a rubber form making something like a rigid sleeping bag. This is more like body armour than a bed but the prone position of the inhabitant indicates passivity rather than aggressive action. It suggests that a person could resort to deep sleep as a form of defence.

This extreme and passive strategy is in contrast to *Eddie's White Wonder* (1998), a sculpture presenting an image of vigorous growth. While the energy of this rubber vine is exciting there is clearly something wrong, indicated by the fact that it is totally white and the growth tip heads down to the floor instead of up to the light. Clearly this form is neither phototropic nor photosynthetic. It hasn't the chlorophyll needed to turn sun energy into life and it doesn't even know where the sun is. Nevertheless, it thrives in its own weird way. It's named after a renowned plantsman in Vancouver who, in the 1950s, hybridized two native dogwood trees into a more floriferous and hardier cultivar

called Eddie's White Wonder. Although his work is highly celebrated (his tree is the centennial tree of Vancouver), I have reason to regret this kind of interference with what was indigenous to this territory.



In this way, *Eddie's White Wonder* comes from the same concern as *The Hutch* in that it's hard to know what to do with the unstoppable human drive to mess with nature. Is our drive to change and develop things a misfiring of basic impulses? Is it aspirational or suicidal? I find it hard to tell. In these works I entertain the contradiction.





Zero Things:
Liz Magor
Interviewed by
Lee Ann Norman

Commissioned by and first published in *BOMB Daily*, June 18, 2019

LEE ANN NORMAN: When I first began preparing for our exchange, I read many reviews interpreting your work as concerned with the relationship humans have to their stuff, but you said to me that's not quite accurate. Can you talk a little bit about your aesthetic concerns and how they have evolved or manifested in the new work featured in *BLOWOUT*?

LIZ MAGOR: In my work I try to interrupt the trajectory of objects that have been thrown out of their orbit. Their usefulness, or charm, or pertinence to us is over, and they are in free fall, on their way to disintegration. When I find them they are ownerless and useless. The context that once made them important has been dispersed, so when I bring them to the studio I try to identify what their value could be in the future. This future value isn't tied to what we thought of the thing in the past; rather, it's a latent quality, perhaps imagined, made visible through new relationships to other objects or materials.

In half of the works in this exhibition I've let the "falling apart" of discarded objects proceed to a more advanced degree. Some of the things are falling to the floor, while others have been pulled apart and are now in bits and pieces, almost to the point of forming dust or debris. At this point I intervene with components I think of as agents. I use the word agent because it implies a deliberate, effective action. Formally, I make one part of the sculpture act upon another part. In some instances it's a stuffed toy holding or comforting a dismembered part of another toy, or a figure that is halting the fall of a bolt of material. Even the clear Mylar boxes are performing a service by restoring the promise of packaging, maybe returning a touch of allure or dignity to these damaged things.

NORMAN: The things we collect or throw away create narratives about how we understand or experience the world, and maybe how we'd like to experience it. Is storytelling something that resonates with you?

MAGOR: It's true that my work has a strong narrative drive, but my intention is not to resurrect the previous life of a thing or generate curiosity about its absent owner. That relationship is severed, over. My question is: What is possible following the failure of that story? I see these works as vignettes, excerpts from a narrative where the

objects have moved on, perhaps acquiring self-regard in lieu of our regard. The story is no longer about us.

NORMAN: But do you always consider that severed relationship between object and owner as a failure? If we use an object, it serves its purpose until it is no longer useful or functional in the way it was intended, so the notion of the protagonist in the story shifting away from the human and toward the object is intriguing. This is the possibility, in your view, right?

MAGOR: Sure, calling the discarding of a thing a “failure” is a bit dramatic, I agree. But using this scenario is a means to an end, the end being a repositioning of the material world in the imagination as phenomenal, active, and having agency. Inevitably this will shift the human out of the center. If you then ask, “What’s the need for this repositioning?” I would probably decline to answer, or at least resist claiming that this shift is a means to a further end, like some correction of our perception or something.

NORMAN: Yeah, I get that. What is really interesting to me, though, is how you seem to be taking these objects on their own terms in whatever context you happen to have encountered them. Maybe this is where narrative might be more relevant than how I originally positioned it, especially since you aren’t interested in the “life” of the object before you came upon it, per se. Tell me about your material choices. Are you drawn to certain objects?

MAGOR: I don’t question my impulses too much. Of course, they’re personal in that they are my choices, but I’m not much interested in things that reflect details of my life. It is not my intention to look back or nurse memories; in that direction lies nostalgia. The things I bring to the studio seem to fall into three categories. First there are the things that dramatically change their identity or potential when put in relation to another object. Then there are things that are designed to appeal—toys with big eyes, shiny things, gold things, glittery things; it’s interesting how material the appeal-drive is and how it keeps operating even when the things are sitting in the dust bin. But the biggest group is probably the “zero” things, things that still hold some attraction in their form or reference but end up neutralized by an opposite force: a fashion that has passed, unfortunate damage, or

simulated materials like the plastic-leather of many of the shoes in the installation *Shoe World* (2018).

NORMAN: Right. I'm sure you never really imagined that you would find shoes in a thrift shop that would inform a future artwork.

MAGOR: I'm always surprised by what fetches up in a thrift store. But I can predict that my future artwork will be based on your past pleasures.





Spring/Summer 2020

Unpublished, 2019–21

It's the fall of 2019. But let's call it Spring/Summer 2020. That's what fashion designers do; projecting their sight forward to imagine what we'll wear in the near future. On this day, outside an armory building in Bloomsbury the assembled fans of Jonathan Anderson have failed to take up his visionary habit.¹ Instead they are parading around in styles that were thought up months ago, essentially wearing last year's clothes as though they are the now thing. I get it. These outfits are so distinct and visual that there must be limited opportunity to wear them. They're not for work and not for hanging out. So, when is the right time? A runway show, of course! This is the best time for exaggerated chains around your neck, and sweaters assembled from big blocks of knitting and shoulder bags in the shape of baseball caps. These volunteer mannequins are up for it, separated from the rest of us by their vivid, pulled-together look. They pose in pseudo conversation while a pack of photographers nip away at them. Speaking of fashion, who knew that paparazzi style has hardly changed in decades? It's still men with vest-y pockets and clunky necklaces made of cameras. All this heavy equipment looks so old-fashioned, such big, long lenses. I thought all camera equipment had shrunk to iPhone size years ago.

As the crowd in the street gets thicker, the limos start pulling up. Passengers disembark and I'm surprised to see that they aren't wearing JW Anderson. Instead they are understated with clothes of fine, dark fabric and no extras. Maybe these are JW Anderson togs cunningly mixed with other things, not straight out of the tube as worn by the non-limo influencers. Except for this arrivée. Is that a Chanel dress? Yes, it is, judging by the distinct textile. Falling to mid-calf the hem of this handsome garment meets a tall boot, so we see no leg at all, but the sleeves end well above the elbow in acknowledgement of the warm weather. The wearer is clearly someone who disregards the command to fashion up as she approaches the door unaccompanied. This style obscures its age. It could be Fall/Winter twenty years ago. Or even Spring/Summer of last year. Regardless, this is a smart dress; it knows what it's here for—to unify the different parts of a body into a column that supports a head that presents a persona. In this case the neckline of the dress is humble enough to host a bejeweled necklace that lights up the face while a short, strict bob tamps it down. The brilliant stroke is a horizontal band of sunglass across the eyes that puts a stop to any idea that this body, this person, is here for you. This is a team effort managed by an outfit.

1

Northern Irish fashion designer, b. 1984. He established JW Anderson in 2008. The label's Spring/Summer 2020 show was presented in London on September 16, 2019.

Picking up the signal we push toward the entrance worrying in advance about our status which is determined by seat assignment. All worth is measured by proximity to the Chanel dress which, of course, can have only two companions, one on each side. To her left we see a charismatic Black man wearing a woman's hat and fingerless gloves while to her right sits a rich-looking older guy in casual jacket and slacks.

Lacking such positional advantage, it is left to the rest of us to claim our importance in different ways. Some locate acquaintances and generate excited greetings. Others are taken up by the photographers and I notice a frenzy building around a substantial woman dressed in black. As she faces the cameras, she kills all expression and spiritually vacates her body leaving nothing but flesh squeezed into long black gloves and a sleeveless vest/corset concoction. Her body billows up and out at the front and swells over the zipper at the back. I wonder why excess flesh on the chest is favoured over back fat. Doesn't it all belong to the person who is fascinating and therefore, shouldn't it all be fetishized? But no, the dark side of her body is of little interest to the cameras, only the front is powdered and photogenic. Giant red lips, blond hair, creamy skin, and pitch-black sunglasses. Not subtle. Unruly hair and extra parts are pushed to the back using all kinds of pins and persuasion. The cameras are hungry for the front of her, snapping away. They want to eat her up. This goes on for a crazy long time. Considering that her body barely moves and there is no change of expression I can't figure out what they really want.

Eventually they turn to the Chanel dress. Hers is not such a static pose as several strikers are circling and there's some conversation going on. For the second time in five minutes I'm in a position to see the non-essential part of a celebrity's body. The cameras want only the front, so she is standing with her back to me and I notice the sharp outline of shoulder blades and the hardware bit of clasp that holds the necklace on. I also notice that the skin on the back of her arms is dry and rough. Despite intense grooming she hasn't cared for this part of her body. She can't see it! I consider that the thin body appeared elegant when encountered head-on but looks frail and weak from behind and I'm reminded that identity changes with every revolution. Of course, as a sculptor I know this. In its most rudimentary role sculpture is about weight, mass, and volume. The goal is to undo





images and reveal them as multivalent, materially bound, constantly emerging and round, as in “in the round.” Each viewing angle of a sculpture offers a fragment of the whole and these views are alternately stitched together and disassembled as the viewer rotates. The apprehension of the thing, therefore, takes time to achieve and can’t help but include the physical fact of the viewer.

What a revelation it was for me to understand that a silly sculpture like the *Three Graces* was concocted as a solution to a time/space problem that makes it impossible to see the front, the side, and the back of a figure in the same instant. And what admiration I had for Rodin when I learned that he made several casts from the same mould and positioned them at different angles on his *Gates of Hell* so that they could represent disparate characters in the story. Then, how revelatory to discover abstract sculpture, the work of Anthony Caro or Tony Smith, for example, to be models that push this conundrum of identity to its limit. From here a sheet of steel is a plane, wide and expansive, from there it is an edge, as thin as a line. Hurray for sculpture! It’s so much more than Instagram, a painted picture or a photograph. It is complex, like us, and so dependent on our bodies being in the same space as the art that it feels like family.

Here at Yeomanry House I’ve been preoccupied with the appearance of people since we came in, but once the runway show gets going, I think maybe this event has some sculpture DNA after all. The models are crossing the stage on a diagonal line, fast walking straight toward us. They have a trick of placing one foot directly in front of the other, like a sobriety test taken at speed, which reduces their already minimal girth to one leg wide. They are breathtakingly thin, but long, and always with a good horizontal line of shoulder on which to hang the clothes. They come in a rapid, continuous flow, spaced about thirty feet apart so that every half minute there’s a new outfit coming right at us. We barely have time to acknowledge it and understand the details before it pivots and the model races down the left side of the stage, giving us a view of the garment’s back. I’m thrilled at this dimensionality, but don’t know whether to finish looking at the dress as it recedes from me or start a study of the next one advancing. There isn’t time to do both. One by one they charge us and then turn to charge the photographers. Once there, at the far side of the stage they turn again, en route to make their exit, weaving skillfully through

the spaces that open between the new, emerging girls. Theoretically this is the chance to see the garment from the side and consolidate an understanding of the design, but honestly, who has time? I am engrossed and enthralled, struggling to take it all in. Are the big holes in that dress rimmed with diamonds? How does that silver cape float? What metallic fabric is so featherweight? And what's with those gilded harnesses around the breasts? Is this a pretzel-shaped vest or an exterior brassiere? I might be involuntarily exclaiming out loud I'm so transported. It's as thrilling as a sports event. And now the models are coming around again, giving us a second chance to see each outfit, but they are closer together and walking faster. It's even more intense. I want them to stop for a second, or better yet, I want to step down onto the stage and handle the clothes as though they are on a rack. It's scary how avid I am for these dresses.

But then, in a blink, it's over. The excitement lets down and we breathe. The show has lasted all of twelve minutes. Jonathan Anderson comes out to receive our happiness and as soon as he retreats everyone jumps up from their seat and begins to look for someone. I remain a spectator for a minute more but can't keep it up. I have no one to meet and I feel the imminent collapse of my removed, observational mode. Suddenly I realize I'm not myself. Sure, these pants and shoes have been part of my wardrobe for a few years, but on top I'm wearing a strange blouse that dangles long, heavy ribbons from the sleeves confounding my navigation, and under my arm I've clamped a leather bag as big as a split log. These are new to me, both from JW Anderson Fall/Winter 2019 and strategically positioned on the most visible half of my body. I figured no one would see me from the waist down.

What has happened to my normal jacket and faithful sling bag? Now I remember. I was here last night checking out the sculpture that the JW Anderson team had installed across the breadth of the runway stage. It all looked good. With no people in the room, just very bright lights and a white floor, it was much like a gallery and the transparent boxes with their scattered contents appeared as I had last seen them in Chicago. I am still attached to this piece. It's new and I've worked on it for over a year; figuring out its reason for being, guiding its materialization, adjusting the relationship of the hundreds of bits and pieces deposited in the boxes.

The work consists of about eighty clear mylar boxes stacked one on top of the other forming a crystalline, vertical village. It appears that disaster has visited every household as the residents are largely textile toys and any damage that can befall a stuffie has occurred. Dismembered arms, legs, ears, and noses are strewn from top to bottom, flayed terry towel hides float between floors, plastic eyes plucked from fuzzy heads stare out from heaps of torn fabric, figures with their stuffing pulled out are comforted by those who remain intact. Clouds of tulle, drifts of fibre-fill, and piles of strung out yarn form landscapes on which stuffed critters fret and act. Although the boxes are transparent their walls reflect light in crazy ways so to see what's inside you must move around and look into each little apartment.

This is what I did last night. Checking everything.

Using the work as the set piece for a runway show wasn't my idea but I am co-operating. The plan was presented to me just a week ago, not as a proposal but as an announcement delivered with a happy flourish as though I could only be delighted by such a good match. What went unsaid was the fact that as the work is no longer in my possession, I need only be informed, not consulted. I asked around, checking in with other artists as to the wisdom of this move. Most people were excited for me, JW Anderson is a cool designer! And if the installation is sound, what could be my objection? That's a good question. I know that my values were shaped decades ago at a time when artists eschewed straightforward aesthetic industries like design and fashion, imagining their own efforts to be of a critical, not affirmative, culture. But design has developed in ways that matches, perhaps eclipses, the aspirations of art, and art has never freed itself from the influence of patronage. So I'm hoping my uncomfortable feeling isn't because this event shatters an outdated hierarchy I subconsciously want to maintain.

In the interests of growing a good relationship to other cultural industries, I've been forward in identifying what distinguishes art, particularly sculpture, from other endeavours. This is research I can attend to and I've studied the fundamentals of things in the world, identifying the various forms that share literal space with our bodies and tuning in to their ability to generate affect. Sculpture has alerted me to the phenomenology of things, to the dependence of image on

material, and has made me wary of, bored even, by simple appearance. Which is the problem here. This event is so generative of image and appearance that a sculptural operation can't actually happen. Nothing here is "in the round." Even these beautiful dresses will be worn like masks obscuring the reality of the body, its personhood and vibrancy. And now my work is doing the same thing; performing as a prop, a costume, a stage set. Not what I was aiming for.

The crowd is spilling from their seats. In their effort to be seen and get some viewing distance on each other, the guests are moving backwards onto the stage. In the surge they don't notice that the backs of their legs are knocking over the stacks of boxes that used to be a sculpture. It's all behind them.

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