

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, WE ARE FLOATING IN SPACE

ROSEMARY HEATHER

On the horizon of the complete disappearance of the work
nothing will remain but this: the relation between us.¹

If we put ourselves in the space imagined by relational aesthetics, it is possible to see the topography of modernism and postmodernism as a shore we've pushed off from. As the distinctness of its landmarks, the shadow of its dual influence, recede from view, we are left floating. It is a situation that is unique, if only because we are able to sustain it, to be relaxed and happy travelers, free even of the desire to glance backward, and free of anxiety about where it leads.

The spatial metaphor—nameless, placeless, but a space nonetheless—seems apt. There is much to suggest that this situation—an absence of the object and a newfound lack of dependence on the institution—results from the virtual nature of media relations. More than ever new media provide an abstract avenue for cerebral connection. It is a world of virtual sex, virtual money and illusory ideas about “instant” communication. In relation to this, contemporary art finds its relevance by bringing the body—not a theoretical body but one that exists in everyday interaction—back into the equation.

The defining feature of the media relation—new or otherwise—is its atomistic character. The Internet, still only in the early stages of its development, is for now the quintessential expression of this. Revolutionary in the efficient way it is able to navigate time and place, it is also equally

efficiently, isolating. Virtual communities do exist but the precondition for any one of them is the individual alone at his or her computer.

The worlds we inhabit are increasingly mental, increasingly not defined by our actual location. What is a larger expression of this condition? In a word: globalism. Or even better, more to the point, the idea of money itself. As public policy makers never fail to remind us, money is the nodal point of existence, if not the apex of human relations. It is this philosophy that drives the policy of certain conservative governments: to eradicate the social or see it exist in only the most individualistic of ways, from peer to peer, or person to person. The intent here is to remake society in the image of capital itself: that is, as an amoral and unceasing kind of flow.

Acting as a ballast to this tendency is the practice of the relational aesthetic. As a way to conduct a kind of investigation into this, I asked seven artists—Adrian Blackwell, Germaine Koh, Sandy Plotnikoff, Lucy Pullen, Luis Jacob and the Instant Coffee's Jennifer Papararo and Jin Han Ko—to answer three questions about their practice:

1) What is the origin of your work?
(How did you arrive here? i.e. origin in terms of influence or in terms of your practice.)

2) What is the relationship of your work to locality?

(Where is here? Is Toronto/the city you live in a specific context for your work? Is the urban environment integral to what you do?)

3) What is the relationship of your work to the present?

(In what relation does your work constitute itself? Is it conceived in relation to a specific audience? Specific social conditions? This might also be a question about the contemporary role of the gallery/institution.)

For all of the participants, Toronto has been a context for their work, often in collaboration with other respondents: Sandy Plotnikoff and Lucy Pullen's collaborative work is well-known; Luis Jacob and Adrian Blackwell took part in the February Group's *Mattress City* action at Toronto's City Hall and were both among the initiators of the Anarchist Free School (Toronto, 1998-2000); Instant Coffee is an ongoing collaborative project that plays all-accommodating host to an array of infections, art-like and otherwise. In spite of these connections, the respondents would not necessarily see themselves belonging together as a group. Although all have done work based on some form of exchange, all also avail themselves of a variety of artistic methods, and so should not be considered relational aestheticians as such. This is in keeping with relational practice's tendency to be an aesthetic category defined only by its individual instances.

Curiously, this forum, because it does not create the conditions for a real conversation, replicates the tendency towards atomization. The email response format ensures this. It is an irony that all the better brings into focus what the relational artwork does, which is to use the specific incident to allow us to imagine the bigger picture, the network of relations that is society itself.

Luis Jacob

The origin of my work is always my own experience, which entails the places where I live, the people I meet and love, and the things I come to learn. In terms of my education, this attention to experience is something I learned by studying the work of phenomenologist philosophers like Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger.

As a Queer person and an anarchist, I am particularly struck by the strangeness of our social world, and inspired by the myriad instances of survival and resistance that people manifest wherever there is oppression—and there is always oppression. This is where I see my work originating.

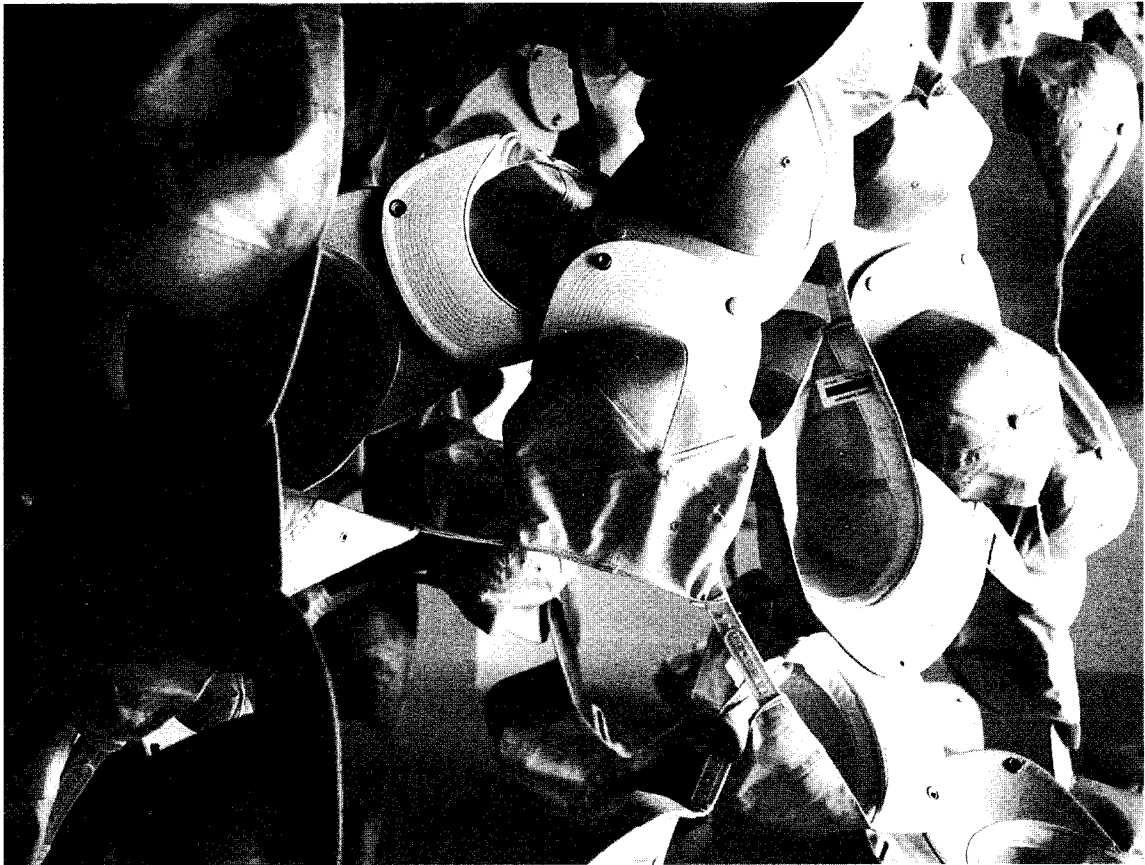
For some reason, I feel very committed to living and working in Toronto. The urban culture of Toronto is what I know best, and I find it difficult to imagine what my work would be like if I were living elsewhere.

In general, I find that what we call site-specificity is a very limiting artistic method. Having said that, I always try to take into account the contexts in which I present the work I do. The "Where?" is the thing that determines the "What?" when I am preparing work for a given presentation. And "Where?" is shorthand for "Who is there?"

I am mostly an ignorant person. There is much in the world we live in, about which I know only the most superficial aspects. I take it as a premise that the audience of my work is multiple, heterogeneous, mutable, and unpredictable. Above all, I believe that its members each possess creative powers symmetrical to the creative powers embodied in the work.

We all live in the midst of streams of discourse, to which we each add our two-cents-worth, and in relation to which we stake our point of view. In my work, I try to add what I feel is absent from a given field of discourse. At times the work may need to be friendly or oppositional; at times it may need to be idealistic, or what my friend Ann Dean calls "brutal." In any case, I want for my work to have a dynamic role.

¹ Jean-Ernest Joos, "Community and Plural Relations: A Dialogue between Philosophers and Artists," *Parachute* 100 (October-December 2000), 54.



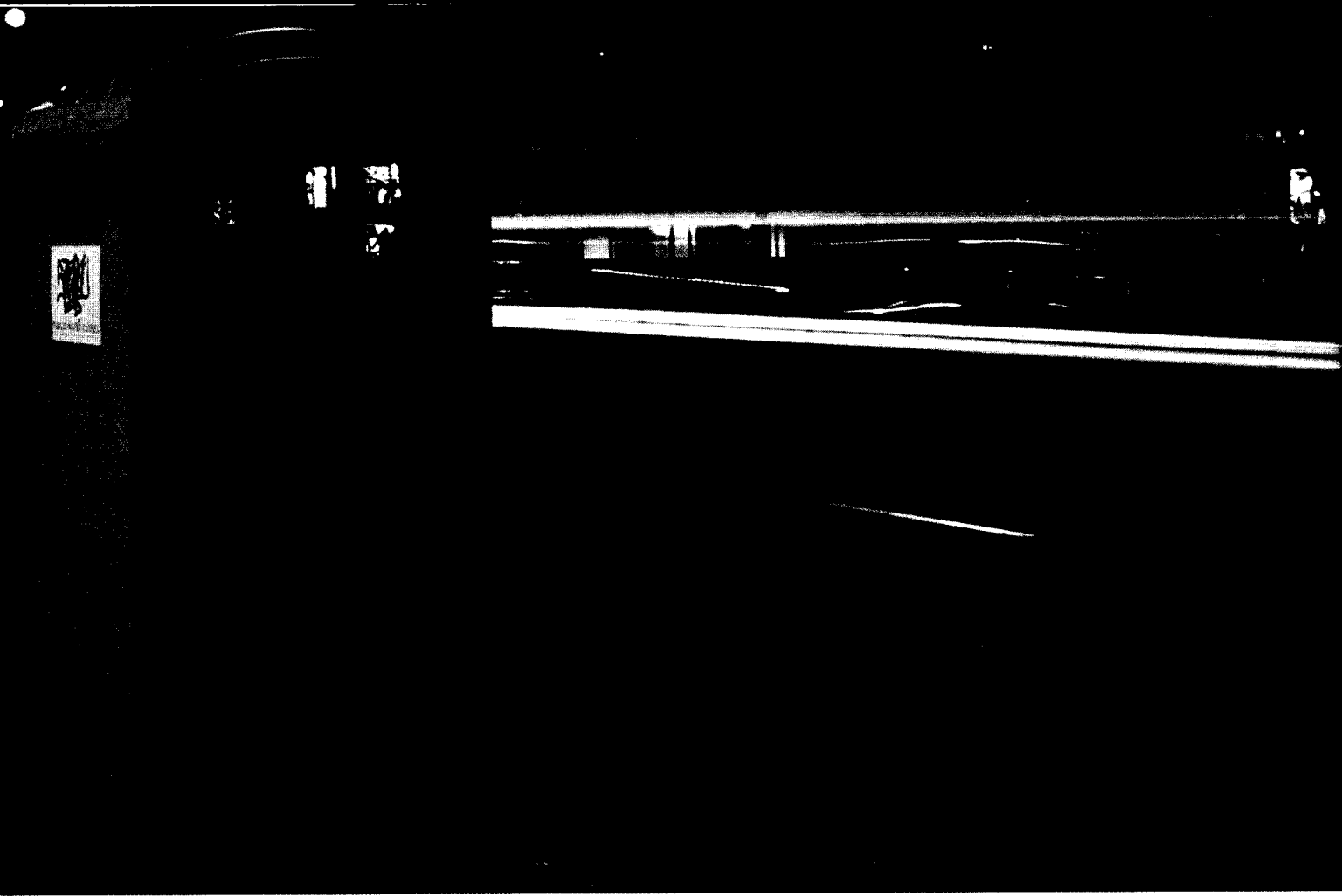
Sandy Plotnikoff, *Hat Scene*, 2001, numbered edition of 500 yellow pro-style caps, snaps, labels
Published by Solo Exhibition

Sandy Plotnikoff

Hat Scene features customized hats with snap fixtures on the brim and crown. The snaps allow the hats to be assembled in sculptural forms and as a self-sufficient installation, or joined through temporary performance actions between groups of people, or worn independently of any art context. *Hat Scene* changes and permeates according to its audience.

Selected recent projects relating to *Hat Scene*:

- snap tips on red gloves
- green hat worn backwards. Patch taken off, top button moved to one side
- two of same hat worn stacked, top one for another person
- three red caps joined by brim snaps
- two people in red hoodies joined in spontaneous zipper performance, Valentine's Day
- exterior of Money House (Toronto house party/ art show site) painted mint green for St. Patrick's Day, matching green hoodie worn to party. Hoodie soaked in Scope for mint scent
- self-portrait snapshots wearing 150 differently colored hoodies color-coordinated with different locations and situations
- twin brothers dressed as Simply Red and Yellowman perform color/clothing audience intervention at Blue Floyd concert
- contagious costume rash: quantity of pink clothing distributed from my costume worn overtop of other people's Halloween costumes
- mobile using two socks and coat hanger hung from found shoes on telephone wire
- yellow turtleneck, neck cut off and worn as headband
- ball-point pants



Adrian Blackwell

Public Water Closet (PWC) sits at the intersection of a number of divergent strands in my thinking. It is an attempt to place art not simply in a public context, but also within a social and political dialogue. The project makes available one of the basic infrastructures of public space—a washroom. Its aesthetic and conceptual strategy acts in part as an alibi for the controversial proposition that public space should be open for use by any member of the public, regardless of their economic situation, and not merely as publicly funded location for capitalist accumulation.

The form of the work overturns (or in Situationist terminology, *detourns*) the basic function of the two-way mirror, which is to provide systems of power a safe venue from which to survey a population to be controlled. In *PWC* the hierarchy is reversed, so that people on the street who are currently being harassed and prosecuted for their expression of basic needs and functions, are allowed a location from which to watch the city, without being seen.

The work is clearly influenced by the related practices of Robert Smithson, who postulated sculpture as a mirroring of its site; Gordon Matta-Clark, who literally cut buildings open, exposing their interiors to view; and Dan Graham, whose use of reflective glass in the construction of fun houses and follies disarms one of contemporary architecture's most ubiquitous and problematic materials.

PWC is a prototype. It plays with the modernist ambition of universality. Theoretically it can go anywhere, but it works best in a city where public washrooms are not available, and where their emergency provision would be useful. It was conceived in the context of Mike Harris's Ontario and Mel Lastman's Toronto. Both politicians prioritize tactics of police repression over economic redistribution or provision of basic public infrastructures. In the summer of 1998 the province shoved the Safe Streets down peoples throats. This new law gave the police special powers to criminalize behaviors characteristic of



Adrian Blackwell, *Public Water Closet*, 1998

homeless people, including aggressive pan-handling and squeegeeing, the only means many individuals have to survive. *PWC* was located at the corner of Queen and Spadina, the epicenter of the conflict surrounding squeegeeing, where local businesses demanded protection from these independent entrepreneurs. To install the water closet legally, I needed the permission of surrounding stores. Many were amenable to the project because it was an artwork, as long as the washroom was not placed directly in front of their store. However, certain businesses were vehemently opposed, claiming they would take the issue to their councilor and arguing that it would encourage people they considered undesirable to inhabit the city's streets. These responses transparently articulated an understanding, shared by the city and the province, as to who is considered a legitimate inhabitant of urban space.

PWC attacks what Samir Amin calls the "single thought" of contemporary capitalism: "globalized neo-liberalism."¹ It proposes first of all that

alternate frameworks for urbanism must be investigated. This is to say that at no moment can we accept the reduction of urbanism to its own capitalist single thought. Secondly, it specifically argues that the city cannot be segregated along class lines, as the commodification of urban space currently insists; rather, it has to operate as an engine of difference and adjacency. Thirdly, it attempts to invent an architecture of play. Public infrastructure could allow for sensuality and erotics, invented autonomously through participation and collaboration, rather than through media's constantly increasing infiltration of our city's streets. Finally, it creates an architecture that subverts the growing militarization of urban space, the corollary of current attempts to liberalize trade and investment under the stewardship of global capital.

¹ Samir Amin, *Spectres of Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), 43.

Germaine Koh

The very first artworks I exhibited were abstract paintings, but ones that were fundamentally concerned with the semiotic structures and sign systems through which they circulated and communicated. From there it was natural to move towards thinking about, and dealing in, real objects circulating in the wide world. As for influence, of course there are artists whose work I view as exemplary of the kind of practice I'm trying to maintain (for instance the socially-engaged-yet-non-dogmatic stance of Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Rirkrit Tiravanija), but I also try consciously not to dwell on other artists' work, in favor of returning to the world around me as my primary reference and source of observations.

Although they use commonplace phenomena, my projects almost always either derive from, or exist as experiments within particular situations. The work is based in street-level conditions, either as propositions sent out into the world, or as evidence drawn from it. I have also done work in relation to specific sites, using materials that were common or endemic to those situations, such as the ubiquitous water bottles that litter the streets of Mexico City.

A good example of work balancing the generic and the particular is the long-term project *Sightings*, which was a series of postcards reproducing snapshots I have found in public places since 1992. The cards were offset-printed as same-size facsimiles of the original photos, but captioned on the reverse with the dates, places and conditions in which the objects were found, transcriptions of any notations or other identifying marks on them, and my address. Melding the usual functions of tourist postcards and amateur snapshots (the former commemorating one's presence at public locations, the latter posing individuals in often-conventional situations), this series of postcards is also very specific: they record the actual passage of individuals—me and the people who lost or discarded the photos—through real locations. I thought of the postcards as modest lost-and-found ads circulating in the world, with the hypothesis that perhaps eventually

the images would find their way back to their origins.

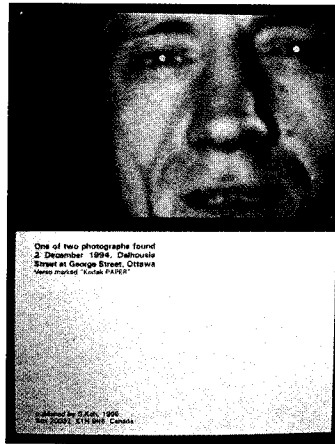
Incidentally, this did happen, six years after the project began, when a woman from Melbourne contacted me about her photo, which I had found next to a dumpster in the off-Broadway theatre district of Manhattan.

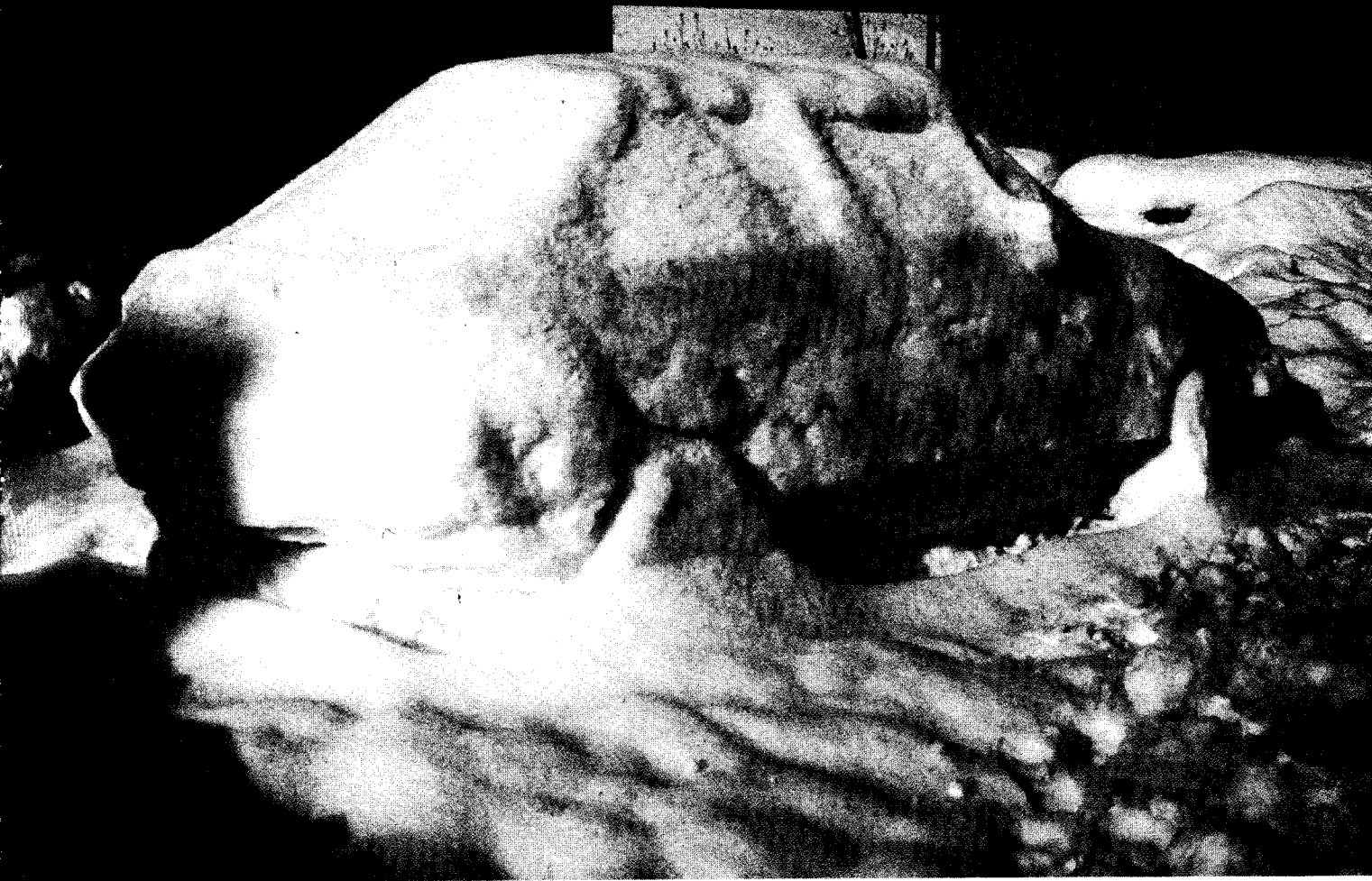
Further on the topic of locale, it is relevant to note that I am consciously without fixed address, attempting to live lightly in the world and to be

mobile, adaptable and responsive to prevailing conditions. This is part of a desire somehow to de-emphasize personal identity in favor of the collective, and it also relates to your question about the present. Much of my work exists essentially as process: long-term and ongoing projects, ephemeral actions, intangible objects, and work that is realized through social exchanges. This arises specifically from a will to insist on the present tense, to pay attention to the quotidian actions and situa-

tions through which everyday meaning is shaped. There is a quiet sort of social intent in this, based in a belief in the grassroots as a powerful, if often understated and underestimated, force. While my work often makes use of existing social structures and institutions, it tends to complicate these, for example through its tendency to disappear, its refusal to come to a close, and its non-commercial nature.

As for how the work is digested, people can encounter my work in quite distinct ways, with different stakes: either through direct experience (in some cases without noticing) and/or through engagement with its concepts. The chance encounter or unconscious interaction has a certain evidentiary value in terms of observing how bodies circulate and collide, but I also try (without compromising the veracity of the experiment) to set up the situations in such a way that these incidental exchanges can unexpectedly open onto thought. I know that some of the things I do will be noticed by very few people, but if they occasionally prompt real reflection about the world at large, I think that's pretty good.





Lucy Pullen, *Car*, 2000, 100% snow

Lucy Pullen

The ideas I pursue develop out of my experience of the world. For a long time I lived in Nova Scotia. In America I have become more independent. I get up earlier and work harder. Life is regimented. Cars are important. My existence is more solitary. There is a tendency to feel nostalgic for that time when everything was used as fodder for a creative exchange built into each day of a dynamic life.

The question of where is less interesting than what, in fact, happens. Even from Philadelphia you think of me in Toronto as though I am there. Isn't it strange—but it proves my point. Moving between two points; the city and the country or the flat and the studio would be ideal.

My work responds to situations. I use formal devices and chance operations; like surprise, line, humor, light, color and familiarity. These are the elements I manage, through a range of materials like snow, candy, iron, rubber, newspapers,



Lucy Pullen, *Wallpaper*, 1999, installed in the artist's kitchen

wallpaper, rocks, googlieyes, mirrors, office supplies and so on. Many of the works are designed for a viewer to participate in. The difference between my intention and your experience is an important and interesting moment: one that I learn from. Often times my work slips, or, unwittingly pokes a tiny little hole into our detailed, highly constructed reality. This pleases me and is ultimately why I keep making it.

Instant Coffee

1. Since Instant Coffee is the basis of the work then Instant Coffee must be the work's origin. Instant Coffee has always been about organizing events while at the same time being about Instant Coffee. The title of the work, *Urban Disco Trailer+Everyone* (UDT), spells it out: the "Urban Disco Trailer" acts as an excuse for everyone to come together. In the same way, Instant Coffee is an excuse to do something and that something is marked by a particular way of coming together.

The *UDT+Everyone* incorporated the work of over sixty people. Within the project, we staged three separate events: the *Logo Show*, the *Miniature Show* and the *Video Show*. Although we looked for pieces we thought would enhance the leisure and playful aesthetic of the *UDT*, we ultimately left it fairly open. We designed the three *UDT* exhibitions using loose thematics, so anyone who wanted to partake, could.

3. This seems like a trick question, but basically the work of Instant Coffee is an event that is always in process and in initiating that process we are always planning for the next event. We feel comfortable performing for the specialized art crowd and in a way, we bank on it. A patron asked us why the *UDT* was art, and for a moment we were rendered speechless. Partly because we didn't know where to begin (should we start with Duchamp?), but mainly because it never occurred to us that it was anything but.

Ironically, performing in the space of an established art institution like the Art Gallery of Ontario gave us access to a broader audience than we could ever get to attend our other events. To take full advantage of the opportunity, we tried to engage the audience by asking them to vote on what logo/bumper sticker they liked best. We didn't initiate this action to really find out what design the AGO audience liked the most, but used it as a means to keep people in the space longer and get their comments. Often the tally cards didn't even contain votes, but people's email or Web addresses or direct comments, both positive and negative, about the *UDT*. We're currently using some of the comments for other art projects—for some reason the negative comments seem easier to deal with. For us, the voting process also acknowledged the competitive aspects of art production. In the context of the AGO, we also found out that children really like the work. We still don't know what to do with that information.

Even though we like putting on events for a specialized audience, we define that audience as anyone who is interested.

P.S. Design is good for a party.

Influences are too numerous to mention and no one or nothing is beyond being co-opted as an influence. We could easily mention the history of Conceptual art practice as a complex influence, and that we see our practice within those terms—that is, privileging ideas over materiality. But that would deny our love of objects, our veneration for popular images and our use of the aesthetic as style. This may make us Neoconceptualists, but we prefer to think of ourselves as Material Conceptualists.

2. Let's say locality isn't a place, but a practice. The familiarity that is represented by place is embodied by a particular way of working. In that sense, Instant Coffee in itself can be defined as a locality. That might sound pretentious, but it is useful since we like to think that the particularities of our practice can be moved about whether this practice happens in different places or within different communities.

