

## **“Together, at last”** by Robin Metcalfe

Catalogue essay for “Micah Lexier & Kelly Mark: Head-to-Head” - 2012

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Micah Lexier and Kelly Mark are mid-career Canadian artists, friends and colleagues who both received degrees from NSCAD University in Halifax, both live in Toronto and both collect each other's work. Since their respective graduations (Lexier, MFA, 1984 and Mark, BFA, 1994), both have produced prolifically, in a seemingly inexhaustible stream of work. Both have worked in a similar range of media: ink stamp-pads, business cards, wallpaper and text laser-cut or waterjet-cut out of metal; in multiples, neon and performance.

Both Lexier and Mark have made work consisting of, or incorporating, found objects and images; numbers and processes of counting; letterforms (typefaces, ways of representing letters or numerals in print form or in cursive script; statements of intention; corrections or amendments to a found text; and processes of exhausting a material medium (the ink on a plate, the graphite in a pencil). Both have asked other people to sign the artist's own name and then reproduced that signature in their work. Both have produced commissioned buttons for the Toronto International Art Fair (now going by the name, Art Toronto). Both have made work that foreground the gallery as a location of mundane labour. Both have produced multiples and works consisting of very large numbers of the same thing.

Whether borrowing ideas from each other, or arriving at them by independent means, Lexier and Mark have each echoed the work of the other, in ways that illuminate the difference between their art practices as much as the uncanny parallels between them.

Astonishingly, until this exhibition, they have never shown together.

### Process and Procedure

As students at NSCAD, Lexier and Mark were immersed in an environment deeply shaped by conceptualism, understood to place a greater emphasis on the idea that generates the work – or the idea as the work – than on its material qualities. Sol LeWitt's influential 1967 text, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” contains the proposal most often cited to define its subject: “The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.” (1)

That idea often takes the form of a procedure that the artist defines in advance and then executes, or has executed for her, or leaves for the audience to execute or imagine executing. In his 1968 “Declaration of Intent,” Lawrence Weiner wrote that “1. The artist may construct the piece. 2. The piece may be fabricated. 3. The piece need not be built. Each being equal and consistent with the intent of

the artist the decision as to condition rests with the receiver upon the occasion of receivership.” (2)

Weiner’s text reads similarly to Micah Lexier’s rules for the production of his ongoing series, *A Minute of My Time*: “1. Each drawing must take one minute. 2. A drawing may be made with eyes open, eyes averted, or a combination of both. 3. A drawing does not have to be used in an artwork in the same year in which it was made. 4. More than one drawing may be used in one artwork. 5. No drawing can be used in more than one artwork.” These instructions to himself constitute the programme for this body of work.

According to Lexier, “we use systems or rules as a way of generating/creating inventive imagery...imagery that we could not come up with if we just sat at a desk trying to think of how to make unusual mark making... To me all of these projects are a way of making a drawing.” (3)

Both artists have made work about the very act of forming an intention, leaving open the question of whether it will be carried out – Lexier’s *Notes-to-Self* (2007-08) – or rendering the outcome improbable or absurd – Mark’s *I Really Should...* (2002). These two works constitute one pairing in this exhibition, under the title *Good Intentions*.

### **Working hard, hardly working**

Kelly Mark sets herself defined goals for many of her works, with a frequent emphasis on their performative qualities. Sometimes these have an aspect of endurance, challenging herself to perform a task or action for a set time, or until exhaustion, of herself or of the material. To make *Dixon (Until Drawing)* (1997) she marked on a piece of paper with a standard Dixon pencil until the lead was exhausted. The original manifestation of *All In A Day’s Work* (2009) was an artist’s talk that lasted through the hours of a normal workday, from 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. Mark took two 15-minute breaks and a one-hour lunch. When the “boss” was away – when there were no visitors in the gallery – she would sneak outside for a smoke.

A recurring theme in Mark’s work is the art work as work in the ordinary sense of the word: As an occupation, what one does all day to make a living. Since 1997, for *In and Out* (1997, ongoing until 2032), she has regularly clocked in at her studio, like a factory worker, recording on punch cards the hours she spends working: a work she intends to continue until the age of 65. Mark grew up within the greater conurbation of Hamilton, Ontario, traditional heartland of Canada’s industrial economy. In both her work and her self-presentation – ballcap and black nylon jacket – she positions herself close to the condition of the working class. This can be read both as a deflation of the pretensions of high culture and as a reality check, grounded in the actual low-income status of many working artists; their need to hustle for a living. When I speak of endurance as an aspect of some of her performance work – the continuation or repetition of an action for

an extended period of time – Mark counters that this is what most jobs are like: it's no big deal.

Lexier's take on the gallery as a workplace is *Gallery Hours* (2001-ongoing). Setting up a procedure whereby one visitor per hour, during regular public hours, may ask for a custom-minted coin in an envelope, he stipulates that the gallery attendant must ask the visitor to sign his or her initials on a form, modeled on those that record the most recent cleaning of a public washroom. This repositions the gallery as a mundane public facility where work is ordered by repeated tasks and where every hour is accounted for.

During her studies at NSCAD, Mark supported herself working in a local restaurant, and then made a series of works that made reference to that. *Salt Series: Pillar (Approx 100 Million)* (1997) consists of 240 standard restaurant salt shakers arranged in a pillar. The number of shakers suggests the repetitive nature of restaurant work – constantly cleaning, tidying and replacing the same objects – while the “Approx 100 million” in the title refers to her estimate of the number of grains of salt in the work. Characteristically for Mark, she painstakingly counted every single grain in one shaker before multiplying that by 240.

### **Repeat after me**

Lexier has also worked with a profusion of identical objects, particularly in his coin pieces. *Coin Piece (dentil, no dentil)* (1997) is a metal box containing approximately 3,000 custom-minted, nickel-plated coins. Both sides of each coin are blank, but one features a “dentil” – a repeat pattern around the edges of many coins, named after a common ornament in classical architecture. The dentil locates the coins within conventional and classical traditions of ornament, while the blank face of each coin constitutes an absence where one might expect the portrait of a monarch or historical figure. This absence draws our attention to the dentil as the only articulated feature of the coins, teasing the viewer to perceive that each coin has two subtly different faces.

Counting is a recurring motif in the work of both Lexier and Mark. The hash mark that features in Mark's *12345 Wallpaper* (1999/2000) – four downward strokes and one horizontally, to record a count of 5 – has become a trademark of the artist, punning on her last name and reflecting the importance of counting and repetition in her practice. Lexier plays with numeric elements in *Two Ways to Make 2* (2000) and in *Marcel Duchamp's Missed Opportunity* (2007), where he intervenes in a statement by the great French artist to correct what he perceives as a failure to achieve a numeric consistency between the text itself and its meaning.

Repetition figures prominently in the work of both artists. For Lexier, his use of repetition and patterning is “a way of generating an image.” While serving that role for Mark, it also proposes a relationship between visual art and industrial and

manual labour. Working often with multiples in large or unlimited editions, Lexier and Mark both challenge the conventional regimes of market value in art, associated with rarity and authenticity.

“Although we are known as conceptual artists,” says Lexier, “we are equally interested in process and materiality.” Writing about this exhibition’s pairing, *Slow Fade*, he notes, “Both of our works are about ways of depositing ink on paper.”

“Both Kelly and myself often work with found sources,” says Lexier, “Which we then sometimes alter (or just document) and re-present... and this pairing [*Alternative Texts*, which pairs the Duchamp piece with Mark’s *Working Hard, Hardly Working*] is a good example of the two of us using texts as our ‘found’ material. I might also point out the audacity of me trying to ‘correct’ Duchamp...” He goes on to draw a parallel between the concept of this exhibition “and the idea of going ‘head-to-head’ with Duchamp.”

In his 1967 essay, Sol LeWitt stipulated that “irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically.” Mark’s *Letraset Drawings* (2000-ongoing) demonstrate LeWitt’s dictum that “irrational judgements lead to new experience,” while relaxing the rule-bound strictness of conceptual art in favour of free intuitive play.

Both artists have a playful streak, but always with an edge. Lexier’s play is tempered by, or contends with, his love of order. Mark’s humour tends towards the sardonic and the pessimistic. She has a Trickster aspect – a sense of knocking things off pedestals, of being an artist of Misrule – that aligns with her critical working-class stance.

Having a reversible name, either part of which could be first or last, Mark has been known to toy with the confusions that can engender. When, as a student at NSCAD she produced – as part of a sculptural series using railroad ties – a video showing two young men bashing two such ties together, she mused about presenting the same work twice, once under the name of Kelly Mark (accompanied by applause) and once as the work of Mark Kelly (accompanied by boos). Those understanding it to be the work of a man could, presumably, place it squarely within a tradition of heroic masculine material brutality; those knowing the artist was a woman might assume it to be a feminist critique of the same tradition. Mark maintains a crafty evasion of gendered expectations – including those of feminists – of herself as a woman artist.

Entropy and mortality hover around the works of both artists, in registers alternately of anxiety or resignation. Lexier, who has generated paintings, sculptures and installations from calculations of the proportion of his age to his statistical life expectancy, seems to be bargaining with chaos through procedures of counting and measuring; seeking to control it by forcing it into rational systems – actions that point to their own futility even while generating aesthetic

satisfaction. Mark, particularly in her time-based work, directly addresses entropy, deliberately going as far as she can in the direction of repetition, absurdity, exhaustion. One could imagine the artists as two characters in a Beckett play, arguing about the best way to get nowhere.

The procedures that generate many of each artist's works act as challenges to oneself, often coming to completion at a point of failure. For his *Touch Down Drawings* (2004-2005), Lexier set himself the task of drawing a line at the end of a plane ride, at the moment when the plane landed. He continued the series until one trip where he forgot to do a drawing. In the video work, *33 Minute Stare* (1996), Mark stared at a video camera until her eyes became exhausted. Her own physiological failure became the content of the piece.

Mark's procedures often have the character of a dare to herself: irrational behavior undertaken for the hell of it, but with absolute conviction. With Lexier, one has more of a sense of the comforting pleasure of imposing order – and the release of letting go, or moving on, when an ordering process has exhausted itself. For the punctilious Lexier, it is often the mistake, the break in order, that animates the work. In *Wallpaper* (1992), he notes that several of the signatures (of his name, in other people's hands) are misspelled.

This tension also plays out in Lexier's juxtaposition – in *Wallpaper* and in *Individually Numbered Pin* (2009) – where the edition number is handwritten, whereas the number of each individual pin is mechanically stamped: a reversal of standard procedure. This relationship between handwriting and typesetting, or between the organically fluid and the more rigidly ordered, also characterizes Marcel Duchamp's *Missed Opportunity* and *Two Ways to Make 2*.

The pairing of Lexier's *Wallpaper* with Mark's *12345 Wallpaper* is one of many instances of the two artists working with an existing format, one not usually associated with fine art. The wallpaper pieces are displayed together in this exhibition as partly unfurled rolls, which is close to Lexier's practice of displaying it "as a wrapped roll, emphasizing its presence as an object."

Both artists' use of signatures – signed in the hands of other people – critically undermines the fetishisation of the personal mark and of the authenticity of art work as a determinant of value. The Belgian artist, Marcel Broodthaers, similarly displaced the value of the signature in his work, for instance by having it printed rather than written, and on tracing paper (making it easy for someone else to copy).

### **It is what it is**

The pairing, *Signs*, consists of two works that superficially resemble conventional, anonymous directional signage. Mark's *Exist* (2009), which at first glance seems to identify an emergency exit, actually consists of a simple

command to be. Lexier's *This is an Arrow Sharing a Wall With Something Else* (2009) is one of a series of arrow pieces, each of which features an engraved text making a statement about the object itself. For Lexier, "this notion of 'self-reflectiveness' is fundamental to my practice, as is the use of the word 'This,' which is the word that starts many of my text-based works." The *Signs* pairing brings together things that, like many of Lexier's and Mark's works, double back and point to themselves. The conceptual and the material, through text, exchange glances.

The Zen concept of "is-ness" denotes that quality of a thing that eludes naming. The works of Lexier and Mark – whether through the circularity of the act of naming, through their deceptive ordinariness of means, through exhaustive repetition, or through their embrace of failure and disorder – frustrate one's desire for fixity and resolution, surprising the viewer in a moment of recognition that escapes language.

- Robin Metcalfe

(1) Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum*, June 1967.

(2) Lawrence Weiner, "Declaration of Intent," *ARTnews*, Fall 1968.

(3) All quotations from Micah Lexier are from an e-mail to the curator, 3 September 2011.