

Ray Cronin: "Everyday People" (exhibition brochure) St. John: Third Space Gallery, 2006

When I first became aware of the work of Kelly Mark, I would have unequivocally described her as a "sculptor". Her practice in the mid-nineties was rooted in a local (Halifax) understanding of the histories of the primarily New York based movements of Minimalism and Conceptualism, and understanding drawn from the particular milieu of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, and of its faculty. Mark was hardly alone in this "post-minimalist" or "neo-conceptualist" practice, which bore all the marks of the serial and process work of artists like Dennis Oppenheim, Carl Andre, Robert Smithson, Lawrence Weiner, Robert Morris and others who rose to prominence in the late 60s, as well as the performative and politically or socially engaged practices of such artists as Vito Acconci, Martha Rosler and Joseph Beuys. This was the dominant strain in contemporary art in Halifax throughout the 1990s. Mark was one of the keenest of a group of keen strategists and her success with what Ingrid Jenkner, curator of her 1995 exhibition "Works", called "critically motivated sculpture", was notable.

More than ten years on I hesitate to still describe mark as a sculptor, in fact, given her use of sound, video and photography, of drawing and of object-based installations, I would hesitate to describe her practice in any but the most general of terms. She is an artist; any other descriptor is both unnecessary and inaccurate.

Certain elements of Mark's early strategies remain – most notably the collection and presentation of commonplace items – but she has since moved on from more overtly historical or referential works such as "Nail Collection", "Random Pipe Grid", or "1,000 Hits". Mark's new work still retains the layered awareness that is a hallmark of neo-conceptualism but it is less about responding to past work and is more fully realized as her own vocabulary.

In "Devon", a three-part exhibition, the maturing of Mark's critical and conceptual vocabulary is evident. Together the video projection, "Devon", the sound work "I Really Should..." and the video installation "Porn", reflect the range of Mark's most recent concerns. Each deals with what has become Mark's signature subject matter: the quotidian – that is, the a-historical, uncritical, minutiae of the everyday.

However, as commonplace as the subject matter (reflected light from television screens on the walls of a darkened room; the banal details of the daily lives of strangers; a quiet expression of regret or longing) may be, the resulting work retains a quiet force. In "I Really Should...", a room that was once a vault contains Mark's by now well-known sound piece. The work is a litany of one thousand injunctions by Mark to herself: one thousand things that she should really do – such as pay back her student loan, take the initiative, and drink more water. The work, which has been broadcast on radio in NY and Kansas, as well as displayed in art galleries around the world, works best in the kind of setting found here – the intimacy of a very small room filled with the sound of Mark's quiet, monotone voice. Hearing it this way, as when listening to it with headphones, the work becomes a kind of inner monologue, that is, Mark's own obsessive listing mirroring one's incessant interior voice.

"Porn", which continues a body of work that includes Mark's installation "Glow House", features five televisions propped on their backs, and arranged into a rough circle on the floor of the gallery. Each screen plays the same video, and the light they cast glows on

the surrounding walls. The image is a recording of the flickering light cast on the walls of Mark's apartment by another television – one playing, in this instance, recordings of pornographic movies. There is, of course, no visible content, and we are asked to trust the artist that in this case the flickering light is indeed what she says it is, as we do the other works in the Glow Video series, such as “Suspense”, “Horror”, “Kung-Fu” and “Romance”. Utterly mute and visually opaque, these works cast back at the viewer any attempt to read them. Subtle, unassuming, virtually absent, “Porn”, nevertheless, is a compelling work in how, in it, the artist is able to side-step so much of the baggage attached to video in our culture. “Porn” is pure visual experience, and also an idea distilled to its core. It is simply and only the light from television, a reminder perhaps of how that device has replaced the fireplace as the centre of our homes. In our information and interpretation saturated time, to make something that is at once engaging and utterly closed, is a noteworthy feat.

“Devon”, and its companion piece, “Pete”, continue Mark's careful observation of the everyday, and her subtle manipulation of how we, the viewers, understand that everyday quality. “Devon”, in Saint John, is a video projection. On the screen a young man looks at the camera, awkwardly patting a black and white cat. The setting is Mark's apartment, the cat is hers – familiar to those knowledgeable about Mark's other videos. The young man is answering questions from an off-camera interlocutor, simple queries into his relationship with a woman named Devon such as “how did you meet Devon?”, “What do you love about her?”, “What bothers you about her?” and so on. His responses are obviously unscripted, just as he is equally obviously not a trained actor. The subject is human relationships; specifically that between a man and a woman. There are no insights of rare wit, no confessional scenes, and no harrowing tales. It's just some guy talking about some absent girl. Despite its innocuousness, the video is compelling. One gets drawn in, perhaps by the lack of artifice as much as anything else. However, that lack is not as spare as it seems: the companion piece exists, after all, and while one was watching “Devon”, the subject of the video was answering the same questions in the video “Pete”, part of an exhibition at Galerie Sans Nom in Moncton. The conversation is thus sundered, physical distance standing in for the existential gulf between people.

That gulf is perhaps the main subject of Mark's recent work, the innerness of being human. In Mark's work, life is a repetition of an endless series of everyday acts, and whether or not they are acted out in public, there is an inner core of the private. How we pass the time in our heads is the inexhaustible source of Mark's creative imagination.

-Ray Cronin, 2006