

Always Working

THE AESTHETIC LABOURS OF KELLY MARK
by ROSEMARY HEATHER

The fusion of art with everyday life has been a perennial goal of contemporary art, but today it seems forgotten. An obvious explanation: this has already been achieved. The future as predicted by the avant-garde is here, in other words. The signs are ample, if poorly organized in the contemporary psyche; the futurologist Alvin Toffler has made a career out of the insight that the rate of change in the West far outstrips our ability to adapt to it. Even if the avant-garde's penchant for prognostication is now a thing of the past, art continues to be adept at creating templates to help us recognize change, to see the reality of it. For a close-at-hand example, look no further than the work of the Toronto artist Kelly Mark; or, rather, look to the artist Kelly Mark, fusion of art and life.

Tracing her history, it is easy to see how the changes within Mark's art-making parallel changes within the wider culture. While she started out a hardcore conceptualist, the art she makes today is characterized more by what Mark terms "re-creativity"; this shift in her approach is in part inspired by the wholesale changes being wrought within our society by digital technologies. All the while, the work she produces has retained the elegance that only the formal solutions found within art can provide.

An artist of prodigious output, Mark creates works that bear the distinctive attributes of East Coast Canada conceptualism. This is a legacy that began with the 1967 appointment of Garry Neill Kennedy as director of the Nova Scotia College of Art. His 23-year tenure transformed the school, in part because Kennedy, himself an

inveterate conceptualist, initiated a visiting-artist program that featured cutting-edge practitioners of the moment, including Vito Acconci, Dan Graham and Sol LeWitt. The rugged coastal outpost of Halifax proved to be an ideal backdrop for imagining the spare, dematerialized artworks characteristic of first-generation conceptualism. This, combined with the 1972 launch of NSCAD Press, which published monographs by influential artists like Michael Snow and Yvonne Rainer, helped to cement the school's reputation, which lingers to this day.

Sol LeWitt famously voiced the core attribute of conceptualism—"the idea becomes the machine that makes the art." In its purest form, this type of practice can consist purely of verbal statements, which might be written on the wall, as in the declarative sentences of Lawrence Weiner, or exist as a set of instructions, as in the Fluxus-aligned work of Yoko Ono. Although such projects would seem simple to do, the difficulty of making artworks in this vein finds its best summation in the colloquial expression "ideas are a dime a dozen." Because it begins with an idea, the conceptual artwork is necessarily anchored in the person of the artist. For such an artwork to become "real," the artist must be unwavering in his or her commitment to the concept that makes it possible, maintaining it in whatever way is necessary.

The performance-based works of the German artist Tino Sehgal, for example, only exist during their enactment by "interpreters" hired by the artist, and are never documented. Prohibiting the production of images of his works ensures that Sehgal remains the final authority on their existence; they ensue from and return to him, as it were. Sehgal's work represents one extreme of conceptualism's contemporary legacy. Kelly Mark's works, on the other hand, have more in common with minimalist strategies for art-making, but employ a similar steely resolve concerning the use of self to establish their veracity.

Like the sculpture of Donald Judd, many of Mark's works find form through repetition. In the ongoing performance *In & Out* (1997–), Mark punches a time clock installed in her studio every time she starts and finishes working on art. That her studio doubles as her living space points to the fluidity the artist sustains between the two modes; the punch-clock performance stands as a wry commentary on how very thin the dividing line is between the two for the artist. Adding a further dimension of self-deprecation to the piece is the fact that since 1999 it has been owned by the Toronto collector Dr. Paul Marks, meaning that Mark, in effect, has a “boss” who pays her on a yearly basis for the work. Currently, employer and employee in this arrangement are looking for a buyer for the piece, preferably a Canadian art institution that has the vision to match Mark's long-term commitment to her art.

In & Out is an update of Tehching Hsieh's informally titled *Time Piece*, one of a number of year-long performances by the Taiwan-born, New York-based artist. For this work, Hsieh punched a time clock once an hour, on the hour, for a year, from April 11, 1980, through April 11, 1981. Each time he punched the clock a movie camera shot a single frame, resulting in a sixminute stop-motion animation. Hsieh's body of work consists of just six sustained pieces, all of them employing a combination of declared intention and action, the latter often involving extraordinary feats of endurance (perhaps most famously, he spent an entire year tied to the artist Linda Montano by a rope, with the two trying not to touch). His use of the calendar year to structure each performance gives his work a conceptual clarity that invites his audience to contemplate the meaning of time and the arbitrary nature of our frameworks for measuring it.

Mark has said that her own time-clock piece will continue until she “retires.” Itself a work of endurance, *In & Out* resonates with certain conditions in the contemporary world in a way that distinguishes it from Hsieh's *Time Piece*. If Hsieh's work, in its conceptual purity, is

the art-world equivalent of the Great Wall of China as viewed from space, Mark approaches the goal of marking her time as an artist from a less exalted perspective. In a related performance that has been ongoing since 2003, she often wears in public a black windbreaker and peaked cap embroidered with the word *Staff*, which is also the title of the work. For the insight it offers into Mark's choice of art as a profession, a statement posted on her Web site is worth quoting in full: "I tend to show up late. I usually leave early. I take long breaks. I have issues with authority. I don't follow instructions. I don't work well with others. I drink on the job. I complain a lot. But I'm always working..."

By her own account, she is a bad employee, but the job requires nothing less than her full commitment. Setting herself up as an "art worker," she comments on the 21st-century conditions surrounding both work and art. She is "always working" and yet, at least in the case of *In & Out*, faces potential job insecurity. Saving the artist from the prospect of real joblessness, however, is the purpose she applies to the tasks she sets herself, which gives a whole new meaning to the term self-employment.

Mark's refashioning of first-generation conceptualist heroics into a register of the mundane serves as a comment on the banal status of the object in contemporary art. This is a utilitarian approach to art-making that privileges not the unique object but any ready-made substitute thought suitable for making the artist's point. It's a type of practice that dates back at least to Duchamp, although the use in collage of what Clement Greenberg termed "extraneous materials," such as pieces of newspaper or graphics from commercial advertising, marks perhaps the first appearance of the everyday in art. In an early work, Mark counted how many grains of salt would fit into a thimble. Arriving at the number 12,618, she then used this figure to create *Pillar (100 Million Approx)* (1997). Composed of filled and stacked salt shakers of the variety you would find in a greasy spoon, the work resonates with the ready-made, minimalist practice

and the biblical story of Lot's wife. It also demonstrates how conceptual rigour combined with sheer repetition can push meaningless activity— like counting grains of salt or punching a time clock—over an invisible line into a realm where it accrues meaning within the field of art.

Early conceptual art was often said to be engaged in a process of dematerializing the art object. In its immateriality and indifference to traditional forms of art-making, it was thought to represent a kind of resistance to the art market. Considered 40-odd years after its inception, however, conceptual practice looks to have wider ramifications, as it essentially prefigured the very dematerialization of Western culture into the virtual world we semi-inhabit today.

Mark makes free use of a variety of inherited conceptual strategies, in whatever combinations she finds useful. In 20thcentury art parlance, such a bold repurposing of the work of one's predecessors was viewed in terms of an Oedipal narrative; by definition, aesthetic innovation required a certain degree of disrespect for what had come before and a measure of artistic patricide. Today, it seems not only as if traditions of art-making are under threat but that an entire cultural order is coming to an end. The difficulty experienced by the music industry in preventing the sharing of music files on the Internet is the most tangible symptom of this change. (The ease with which new technologies abet such activity fatally undermines the argument that freely available digital music files should be paid for.) Mark's polyglot practice indicates that she holds a similar viewpoint regarding ownership: conceptual strategies are in the ether, free for everyone to use. This is the other side of the ready-made coin, an attitude given guileless expression in the buttons Mark occasionally wears and has informally distributed since 2003, which read "everything is interesting."

The idea that everything is potential subject matter for art suggests that the postmodern dismantling of the dichotomy between high and

low cultures has reached a point of synthesis. The culture we currently live in has a tendency towards the immersive; we are all insiders now, sophisticated manipulators of the codes history has left to us. Many of Mark's more recent works address this condition. Embodying the idea of the immersive is *Glow House*, a work that Mark has created three times in three different cities (Winnipeg, Birmingham and Toronto) since 2001. In it, a minimum of 50 television sets, all tuned to the same channel, are placed throughout a house dedicated to the project. Looking at the work from the street at night, viewers see the house gently pulsing from the collective, synchronized glow of the TV monitors. Taking her cue from the televisual flicker that emanates from residential neighborhoods at night, Mark metaphorically accumulates the ether of our communal entertainments to create a gorgeous, evanescent artwork.

Writing about *Glow House*, the Toronto artist and curator Dave Dyment has noted that "it's rare that we think of televised images as made of light." Mark works with this insight in a number of pieces that use the light emitted from television screens as source material. In the *Glow Video Series (Horror/Suspense/Romance/Porn/Kung-Fu)* (2005), she records the pulsing light given off by a playing television as the light is reflected off a wall. The resulting films are presented on monitors as sculptural works. The monitors have been installed in various configurations—positioned back to back or pointing towards the ceiling, for example. Permutations of the work are titled according to the genre of film that served as the original light source, with the different genres creating different perceptual experiences in terms of rhythm and light. That the experience of television is no less seductive with its content removed speaks to a mass cultural preference for living in a netherworld made up of molecules of light.

Writing about the effects of mechanical reproduction more than 70 years ago, Walter Benjamin theorized that mass entertainment created a new form of reception: viewers of cinema absorbed a film in a way that did not require their direct attention. Itself a kind of

prophecy of the fusion of art with everyday life brought about by the advent of digital technologies, the capacity for distracted perception hypothesized by Benjamin would seem to have been multiplied tenfold in our current culture. Mark's epic work *REM* (2007) recreates this experience using TV as its source. Two hours in length, *REM*, which is compiled from more than 170 films and TV shows, creates a composite feature film from disparate clips Mark recorded from television. The work's narrative is coherent; by definition, film and television provide the building blocks of storytelling. As one watches the work, however, it soon becomes apparent that a semblance of coherence is all that is required; in *REM*, following the narrative is akin to the experience of being adrift in your own thoughts. The work is a parable for our culture—lost inside the figments of its own imagination. Like Mark's practice as a whole, it brings a syncretic intelligence to bear on cultural detritus, ultimately offering us the insight that *our culture belongs to us*. The subtle shift in thinking that is required to grasp this idea is the future of our culture—one that we are already living in today.

"Stupid Heaven," a career-spanning survey exhibition of Kelly Mark's work, opened at the Justina M. Barnicke and Blackwood galleries at the University of Toronto in September, 2007, and will tour to other venues in 2008.