

L.M.R. (Last Month's Rent or Living Making Reflex)

by

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Graduate Program in Visual Arts

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Abstract

Throughout my graduate years my practice has developed around a proposition of the phenomenon/activity of 'artmaking' itself as *the question* to be re-investigated, without any historical presumptions, within the frame of the world we *all* live in. Meanwhile, I consciously and insistently bring the peculiar and esoteric conceptions and languages of the 'art-world' into my practice, in order to demarcate the 'artmaking world' from the rest of the world. This contradictory and redundant practice serves many purposes that are necessary for my daily living.

My thesis comprises project statements, proposals and reviews, empirical/analytical narratives, and diary entrees, all of which function as both a fictional and non-fictional 'record' of my investigation into the symbiotic, sometimes uneasy relationship between artmaking's existence and my daily living. Rather than pivoting around a pre-existing theory (theories) for the development of the discussion, I analyse and explore my own anecdotes to contemplate the theoretical aspects of the 'mundane'. Through this strategy, I intend to demonstrate the *implicit*, not *reciprocal*, relationship between theory and practice (daily experiences). Sometimes subtly and other times obviously, my writings overlap, support, and contradict each other, alluding to the paradoxical nature of my questions and practice.

Keywords: Artmaking, Daily living, Installation, Intervention, Collaboration, Secretary, Rabbits, IKEA

To the ducks in Harris Park behind my apartment

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Note

The inconsistency of the tense in some of my project accounts is not a grammatical mistake but a strategic decision. For example, I describe a project, which has been already realised in the past tense while I analyse the same in the present tense. This is either to situate the reader and myself in the midst of the questioning that occurred in the past incident, or to suggest that the questions posed in the project are ongoing. I also took licence with the language in my diary entrees. Finally, wider spacing has been used to set apart different sections, such as REFLEX, PROJECT, and diary entrees for the effect of visual and conceptual structure of the thesis.

Introduction : Art-Life problematic

I arrived at the beginning of my inquiry about the significance of *artmaking's existence* in my senior undergraduate years. I started realising a discrepancy between my life style and some of the innate aspects of artmaking, such as 'excess' and 'issues'. Not only did I neither have nor want to have many objects (including art works), but also the idea of someone having my work and losing interest one day so that my work would become an 'excess object' started to trouble me. Furthermore, being content with my mundane daily life, I started to run out of issues and subject matter that I 'felt an urge' to express in my work.

In facing these seemingly problematic realisations, I have had to re-investigate what this activity, *artmaking* really signified in my life. Why do I still want artmaking in my life, when it seems to be profoundly occupied by the aspects that do not go with my life? Is there, or could I find/create, a valid space in this discipline? Through these inquiries, I have learned that the motivation and desire behind my artmaking are interconnected with the construction of my daily living rather than with the popular notion of the artistic impulse for creation and expression. I have also recognised that these motivations and desires are often paradoxical, just like the construction of one's daily life. On the one hand, I am cynical and critical about the commonly accepted, somewhat romantic notions of artmaking and artist, yet on the other hand, I am so attracted by one's curious determination to be involved in art as a 'way of living'. While I am troubled by the elitist attitude that often prevails in the art world/institution,¹ I also thrive on the peculiar thrill, excitement, and privilege that it provides. And even as I remain appalled by my constant urge to prove my 'uniqueness marked by artistic qualities', the fear of getting lost in the crowd and drowning in life's daily problems sustains my engagement in art practice. I

need artmaking to pursue a desired lifestyle/identity, while I recycle my daily living for making art. In this reciprocal exchange, I continuously observe and try to learn to live with such aspects of life as contradiction, inconsistency, and the illogical. This symbiotic relationship between my artmaking and daily living has become a prominent aspect in my projects, directly informing the form, content, and approach of my art practice. As a result, my projects not only obscure some pre-conceived notions of where (and how) artmaking happens and where (and how) it is seen/experienced but also beckon questions about artistic authority -- who has the right to engage in art and how, with what kind of intention or purpose, for what kind of success?

The above questions of artistic authority appear to resemble, if they are not identical, to the questions posed for the purpose of deconstructing modernist notions: the 'fictive' self-identity of an artist and the myth of his/her activity.² However, it is crucial to note that the nature of my questions fundamentally differ from that of many deconstructionists'. After decades of such 'demystification' theories and practices, there is no longer supposed to be any fantasy about artmaking. Consequently, I am curious about the further displaced functions of art in our life/world, and the motivations and intentions of *everyone*, who, consciously or not, is still involved in the realm of 'art' (making, viewing, buying, critiquing, designating, and so on). This perpetual existence of our 'engagement', which makes the phenomenon of artmaking thrive is the enigma that I am compelled to address, if not 're-mystify'. Through collaboration with the 'non-art world' (i.e. the world outside the art institution) and the use of alternative sites, I also intend to observe the mechanisms and consciousness (of my own and of the public's) that distinguish and designate this phenomenon (activity), artmaking, from other phenomena (activities) that occur in daily living.

May 22, '99

I finally, FINALLY started writing. Everyone else has been writing but me. I have procrastinated SO hard. I don't know why. I haven't told my profs that it has been this bad. But today is the day. Finally.

REFLEX 1: In my terminology, *IKEA Living* signifies neither an image of middle class living nor a symbol of materialism/consumerism in our culture.³ I use the term *IKEA Living* to refer to the lifestyle in which the peculiar mentality and problems pertaining to artmaking and the art world do not exist. It is the style of living that many can afford, should they wish to. I am not talking about affording the complete set of IKEA living-room furniture, beautifully photographed in the catalogue. (approximately \$2042.00) Rather, I am talking about affording the peace of mind and contentment that a chair (approximately \$29.00), or matching coloured shower curtain rings (approximately \$1.50) or, just the pleasure of looking at IKEA catalogue brings to our lives.

Of course, there are always hardships and anxieties in any style of living: from the fundamental distresses caused by death, illness, and disasters to the more concrete concerns with relationships, lay-offs, social pressures etc. Furthermore, I am very much aware of my privileged circumstance which allows me to talk about academic problems of art and life while many others in the world are suffering from more severe and uncontrollable hardships such as wars, epidemics, and so on. Indeed, the notion of *IKEA living* and *Art living* as such is only applicable to a very specific cultural and social environment. Precisely because of this specificity of my argument, I try my best not to take my daily life for granted.

Before becoming a graduate student, I worked as a secretary for a year. I experienced

some of these 'concrete' anxieties in *IKEA living* myself, when, for example, my company implied that they might have to lay me off. I had hard days when I had to work overtime, or did not perform well in meetings. I also heard that the stresses were even greater for people in higher positions who had bigger responsibilities. Yet at the same time, no one in my section (Engineering Technology) seemed to suffer from the hypothetical problems that my artist friends suffered from. My co-workers all lived various degrees of *IKEA living*. I observed a sense of peace in their minds and environments. Occasionally, some of us 'art-related' people would carelessly describe these people's lives as 'non-creative' and 'monotonous'. My question is, does it mean that they are less happy? ⁴ Are we, who supposedly live more 'exciting' lives happier than they are? I do not know the answer.

On the West Coast where I did my undergraduate studies, one of the greatest attractions was the natural environment. The art scene in BC did not seem to be as lively as in Ontario and I was convinced that it had something to do with the environment. People did not seem to need art as a prominent form of entertainment because they could go to the beach or the mountains in twenty minutes from almost anywhere. Living there made me think about notions of contentment in life all the time. Once in a while, I felt that I could quit artmaking. I would have a job with a regular pay cheque, I would garden on the weekend, have cats and dogs, and take them for walks to the beach. Yet at the same time, my desire to, not even actually 'create' but live as a 'creative individual' persisted and influenced my decision to return to art school.

I am extremely aware of my split desires and perceptions about *IKEA living* and Art living. On the one hand, I am sick and tired of the 'intellectual elitism' of the art world consciousness, as well as my own constant urge to prove my 'special-ness' marked by

artistic qualities.' On the other hand, I am so in love with the peculiar thrill and excitement of the art world, as well as my (and other people's) illogical determination to be involved in art as a 'way of living'. Every day, I long for the peaceful lifestyle in which I would focus on what to wear, which IKEA product I would purchase with my next pay cheque, and where to go on the following weekend. No stupid competition with myself, no hypothetical questions about artmaking with no answers.⁵ Yet every day, I talk with my artist colleague about art and artmaking, and feel saved from life's daily concerns (relationship difficulties, financial anxieties, psychological distress etc.). Without the knowledge that I make art, I wouldn't be able to survive these everyday problems.

Aug 17, 98

After a weeklong vacation, I started looking at IKEA catalogue again.

Aug 20, 98

Sandy helped me to transport my rolled wire to my apartment. Weighs a ton. Crazy. We got it on the elevator, and when I got on the 6th floor, the hooks came off and the roll got looser and bigger. Crazy. Dragged it down the hall to my door, desperately hoping that no one would see me. When I finally got it into my apartment, I made a huge scratch on the carpet. Damn. Unrolled it in the room; had to put a heavy chair on the end to flatten it. It is crazy to think that I just blew \$320.00 on this stupid animal cage, not on new clothes.

PROJECT : *Making living / Living making*, 1998

Making living / Living making consisted of two separate installations that occurred simultaneously: ***Making -living*** took place in my previous apartment, and ***Living making***, at a gallery called the "Palace @ 4 am", both in London, Ontario. The two locations were approximately two miles away from each other, a half-hour walk, or ten to

fifteen minutes by bicycle or car. The viewers were encouraged to visit the two installations one after the other.

In ***Making living*** at Apt # 604 - 71 Grand Avenue, I created an 'art-viewing' space by dividing my living room with a metal mesh wall. Along with this cage wall, metal chains across the kitchen and the bedroom entrances created a narrow hallway space where the viewers were permitted. This space included the washroom. On the wall in this art-viewing space, I displayed various objects which I had either made or purchased. They were placed on semi-circular wooden shelves that were painted in the same white as the wall. While the viewer was in this 'gallery' space, she/he could also observe the other side of my living room through the metal mesh wall.

In ***Living making*** at the Palace @ 4 am, I reconfigured the space by constructing a low ceiling made of the same metal mesh material as the wall in the apartment. In this space I displayed nine oil paintings of either animals or abstract forms (approximately 10x12 to 24x26 inches). I framed them in industrial aluminium strips and hung them slightly higher than the usual gallery display. All the paintings had a price tag of \$350.00. This positioning of the paintings along with the lowered ceiling was intended to create a slightly skewed spatial (and perhaps conceptual) relationship between the viewer, art objects, and the art-viewing space.

At first glance, the two installations appeared to set up obvious binaries, such as private / public, on-site / off-site, 'authentic' art (painting) / readymade, art for sale / art against commodification, viewer / viewed, (entertainer / entertained) and so on. However, the simultaneous existence of ***Making living*** and ***Living making*** resulted in the overlapping, if not fusing, of these supposedly opposing conditions and perceptions. It

signified my investigation into where and how art and artmaking might exist in-between or outside of these trajectories (binaries) and ultimately, where and how I could or would want to exist as an artist. I searched for methods of artmaking and presentation, which somehow made sense of my daily living where contradiction and ambivalence prevailed. The use of my past paintings and the excess space in my apartment to create new installations reflected an equation of romanticism and pragmatism in my daily living and artmaking. My paradoxical desire for, and cynicism about the glamour of the art world travelled back and forth between the gallery space and my apartment. The obsessively carved stone dog bone placed next to the rudimentary cement drippings implied a reconciliation between my own arbitrary rigor for creation and more popular notions of artistic legitimacy measured by prolific and skilled production. The collection of objects also obscured any categorisation of the modes of making, such as making as an expression of creative passion or as a dutiful routine and experiment. Through the physical and conceptual journey between the two installations, I intended to invite the viewers into these indefinable middle grounds, where one may be left confused, yet strangely entertained.

REFLEX 2 : During my secretary period, I told some colleagues that I had graduated from an art school. Ms. Otagawa, an excellent translator, genuinely asked me if I get “an urge to paint or sculpt” when I make work. I had to say “not really”, before even telling her that I neither paint nor sculpt.⁶ Another thing I noticed during my secretary period was that I did not have to demonstrate my ‘artistic expertise’ to become known as ‘Mr. Schillig’s secretary who is actually an artist’. No one ever asked me to bring in even photos of my work, yet people kept asking me about ‘the art world’, or telling me which artists they loved and so on.⁷ Ms. Kato, an outstanding Japanese language teacher for

the foreign employees at the office, started consulting me about her daughter who is 'presently working at a bank, but eventually wants to go into the art business'. "Do you think there is a chance for her?" she would ask me at lunchtime. "Of course, " I would reply, "as long as she is serious about it", all the while thinking, "Gosh, I do not even know if I will ever get into a graduate school myself or if I am even serious about it".

It seems that some of the typical public images of the artist [an eccentric individual, who is preoccupied with expressing his/her 'inner' world] remain predominant.⁸ Rachel Whiteread is described in the September 1998 issue of Vogue: "A pretty woman who conveys *a complete lack of concern for her appearance*, Whiteread is about five foot four..." (italics added).⁹ I swim a lot and bike a lot. I am extremely conscious about my diet and weight. I also love things like watching animals and birds in the park although I never sketch them. One day, I was watching a documentary video of John Scott¹⁰ at the Art Gallery of Windsor. His messy studio, dishevelled appearance, self-destructive lifestyle and his spontaneous drawing method were all portrayed. An older lady came and asked me who this person on the screen was. I said, "It is John Scott, the artist of the exhibit here." "Ah," the lady replied, "I thought he might be."

Considering one's self an artist is often upheld as a type of 'special permission', too. It's OK to be socially dysfunctional. It's OK even if you often flip out. It's OK to be high all the time. It's OK to dress up weird anywhere. It's OK not to be socially responsible. It's OK to make a mess in your apartment. It's OK to be broke all the time. It's OK not to be able to cook or eat well. It's OK that you cannot talk like an adult in public. After freaking out during the preparation of an installation, I quickly become objective and wonder if it is really such a philosophical and traumatic process I am going through, or if I freak out because A) I am immature and/or temperamental, B) I am romanticising the state of

freaking out as a tortured artist.

Someone said to me in a conversation, "That's why you are an artist, not anything else."

What, on earth, did this person mean? Why is it then, that I was a secretary, or may become one again? I did well and was liked by everyone as a secretary, too.

Aug 22, 98

Sick and tired of this "art business". Gallery people are so inconsiderate and socially dysfunctional. Never call you when they say they will; only say stuff like: your work is interesting. LF and I, both having worked in an office, used to talk about how unbelievably inefficient and irresponsible they are. In the real business world, we would never take our responsibility casually like these "arts people" do, or we would be fired. It is all so easy, too; make a phone call, or send back documents on time. How could anyone with normal cognitive abilities fail to do these elementary tasks? Institutions also suck. They don't really care about us, "individual artists".

PROJECT : *Secretary Project*, 1996 -

In 1996 - 1997, I worked as a secretary at an automobile parts company in Japan. Every morning, I would get up at the same time, dress according to a 'code', go to the station and watch people gather. When I arrived at work, I would open my locker and close it, and again open it and close it before walking back to the station. As I spent more days in this uninspiring routine, I started seeing a queer, almost 'sacred' serenity in this repetition. It is a ritual. The reason for the gathering is the participation in a ritual, which emerges from disciplinary systems. In order to objectively observe and subjectively intensify this 'sacredness' of the mundane engagement, I would sit down on the same bench on the platform, take a compact camera out of my 'secretary' shoulder bag, and look through the viewfinder. Record. I would stand in front of the locker, take

out the camera again, and look through the viewfinder. Record. While surrendering to my life as a secretary, I anticipated an artwork coming out of this particular life. This 'double disciplinary system' functioned as a strategy to create a space for me in the world where everyone may be separately disciplined but mixed all together through their participation in a ritual (daily activity). In this space, I observed the frailness and the slippery-ness of how we think the world functions and we function in it as, for example, a secretary, or an artist. The medium of snap shot which came as a practical solution for the absence of available traditional art media, studio space or time during my secretary period also forced me to re-evaluate my own perceptions about artmaking, creative process, creativity, and artistic authority.

In my installation of ***Secretary Project*** at the ArtLab (London, ON, February 1998) and Gallery 44 (Toronto, ON, June 1999), I displayed 164 dated snap shots of the commuter train and my locker in grids, and pressed them under thin plexi-glass. Directly on the wall beside each snapshot grid, I drew outlines of all the individual shots and their dates. I framed the drawings with a sheet of plexi-glass in the same way as I framed the snapshots. I displayed the shots that were accidentally taken in a panoramic format, in separate grids. I did the same tracing of outlines and dates of each panoramic image and framed them with plexi-glass. In the Artlab installation, I also included a row of my pay stubs from my secretary period, on which I put some incidental drawings of animals etc. I repeated the number that appeared on each pay stub on the wall under each stub and framed them with plexi-glass.

Although the installing of the snapshots and drawings required a consistent system of labour, I was very much aware of the ephemeral and contingent nature of my mark making. I drew the outlines of the snapshots freehand while trying to sustain the

dimension of the grid and the scale of each snapshot outline as accurately as possible. I marked the approximate time of start and finish of each set of drawings on the walls, and purposely left some spontaneous marks that occurred during the construction of the installation as well. (i.e. measurements, guidelines for grids etc.) While the snapshots remained as a frozen index for the installation of my secretary project, the drawing, which could never be the same, reflected the ever-changing state of my relationship to this project and to the installation site.

In each installation, the enclosed space filled with the snapshots and drawn marks extended my activity of 'recording' -- the recording of the existence of multiple realities and of my continuous engagement in addressing the peculiar yet mundane relationship between living life and art-making. I consider that my Secretary Project in Japan was a 'test' of my ability to make a space for my 'artist-self' in daily life, and my installation of this project as a 'test' of my work's ability to carve out a space to exist in the context of 'art'. In this sense, my main concern is not the resulting snapshots or the drawings as a work of art, but the visible and invisible significance of the 'activities', created and experienced in the space.

April 30, 98

Perhaps, I always wished I were self-destructive, defiant, and thus spectacle, not just to the others, but to myself. I probably wanted to see my life and myself to be bold, free of "concerns", and spontaneous or something. Seductively "careless".

PROJECT : *Daily Practice of Casting*, 1998 -1999

(Artist statement for the installation of the project at BUS Gallery, Toronto, May/June, 1999)

In the last few years, I have been engaged with project-based works, through which I continuously address the existence of artmaking as a phenomenon in my daily life and in our world, rather than as a means of expression. ***Daily Practice of Casting*** is one such project that I started in September 1998. I select objects in my architectural environment and paint latex rubber on them, usually, twice a day. After each application, I document it with my compact camera, which prints the time of documentation on the developed photos. After numerous applications, I end up with a latex mould, with which I sometimes cast plaster objects, and other times, do not. I have conducted this routine in my apartment in London, in my school building, at my friend's house in Toronto, and most recently, in a hotel in New York for a week during my business/research trip.

This project signifies the multiple functions of artmaking in relation to my daily life. One role is that of duty and/or discipline to manage my fear of the inconsistency of my motivation or passion for making art. This mundane but unusual routine also provides me with a psychological assurance of my artist-identity, wherever I am or whatever I am doing. Furthermore, this secret activity simply serves me as a kind of entertainment for my daily survival, similar to the personal daily rituals that other people conduct. Sometimes, this disciplinary project gives me a valid reason as well to travel somewhere specific. The obscurity of, or the absence of an 'end product' in this project also reflects one of the prominent natures of my artmaking -- In my practice, the aim, process and results of making are all equated and made difficult (or pointless) to distinguish from one another. I am interested in communicating artmaking as an activity rather than as a means of production.

REFLEX 3 : BUS gallery on Queen West in Toronto is a storefront space converted into a gallery. There is a main gallery space in the front and a smaller space in the back. A narrow hallway barely wide enough for two people to pass by each other connects the two spaces. On the wall in this hallway, I put up a shelf that had been kept unused in the gallery (about three feet long and five inches deep), and displayed my objects on it from the *Daily Practice of Casting* project. Katherine Mulherin, who runs the gallery, and her son Jasper lived with two cats in a tiny room hidden behind the main gallery space. The entire 'art-viewing' space was literally their 'living space'. At night, Jasper watched television in or on an installation work that had utilised their TV as a component.

Throughout this century, many artists have advocated the merging of life and art in order to challenge the modernist notion that distanced art from life. Lynda Montano, for one, decided to "frame her life and call it art" in the seventies:

Formerly, I would separate out activities -- run to the studio and what was my "creative time". Gradually, I found this separation unnecessary and felt that it was important for me to be attentive all of the time [...] I made many pieces from 1969 on that experimented with this idea of allowing my life to be a work of art. I lived with different people and called that art -- I wrote the living art manifesto in 1975, and later turned my home into a museum so that everything I did there would be framed as art.¹¹

I too realise that art is no longer that 'special sublime sacred activity' conducted in a secluded studio space, and that daily life itself can be as transcendental as any 'artistic creation'. However, I tend to sense in Montano's "calling it (life) art" a trace of the perception of a hierarchy between art and life, which may contradict her real intention.¹² Ten years after Montano, Allan Kaprow wrote: "...there is art at the service of art (artlike art) and art at the service of life (lifelike art)".¹³ Perhaps, we are now in the age where

there is 'life at the service of art (artlike life)', and soon, there will be 'life at the service of life (lifelike life)'. "Jasper wouldn't care," I thought, "whether his daily life conducted in the gallery is an art gesture or not". He had no choice but to live there.

In retrospect, showing the casting project which pretended to be an artwork and a daily routine at the same time, in the space which pretended to be an art-viewing space and a living space at the same time might have been the only sensible treatment of the work, which, otherwise could simply have been "poetry used as an instrument for living one's life as best one can."¹⁴ Only in this specific site,¹⁵ could my casting project discreetly insist on its need to communicate the existence of an 'indulgent' activity, which seeks for a chance (occasion) to become something else, something to be *recognised*.

REFLEX 4 : Money is always a concern in daily living. I become anxious thinking about life after school as an installation artist. I have estimated artist's fees that I could collect by having shows at artist-run centres.¹⁶ Even in a luckier year, I just would not be able to make ends meet. I think I would have to start making art works that do not cost me so much.

Dave Hickey, in his essay "Dealing", states that art is worthless and priceless. "Art is not a commodity. It has no intrinsic value or stable application". He goes on, "Art and money never touch. They exist in parallel universes of value at comparable levels of cultural generalisation: Art does nothing to money but translate it. Money does nothing to art but facilitate its dissemination and buy the occasional bowl of Wheaties for an artist or art dealer".¹⁷ When I think about the century-long debate over art's autonomy, the politics of commodification, and the glamorous game that the art market plays in relation

to the arbitrariness and abstractness of the trade, 'art', I want to be as evasive as possible in my stance on the topic of money and art. I can't make up my mind between all these stances.

I think of artmaking as an occupation. By occupation, I don't mean just a means of making an income, but something that one is specialised in -- a profession. Meanwhile, income, as a signifier of 'exchanged value', helps to distinguish a profession from a mere leisure activity. If artmaking is only a therapeutic endeavour or a means of self expression, I would stay home and paint in the kitchen. A profession has to be shared and traded, but how do we measure the trading value of a profession nowadays? How do we compare the value of the profession of artist versus, for example, that of doctor?

Despite the influential theory that our world supposedly operates on a rigid economical 'base' that determines the values in the 'superstructure',¹⁸ the notion of value, at least in the capitalist society where I live seems extremely volatile. This gives me both frustration and hope. Many people do endorse what the 'system' values or assigns worth to, but at the same time, everyone seems to have quite different ideas about material or conceptual value -- what is worth investing in, or what should be valued in our society and what should not be. For example, I refuse to spend \$2.00 on a bottle of soda water at a corner store when you can buy the same for ¢ 89 at a grocery store. My mother thinks that making a special trip to a far-away supermarket to save five dollars on your bill is absolutely a waste of time and energy and thus you are actually losing not saving. I don't pay more than a buck at "pay what you can" entrance admission at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Some people paid five dollars at my intervention *Pay What You Can*¹⁹ despite me saying, "Oh, that's too much for this". My parents think that my discipline (profession) is worthwhile because I can do all kinds of things for their house, i.e. making

shelves or arranging things beautifully. Yet my father cannot legitimate my discipline (profession) to his friends without adding, "she will be qualified to teach at the university with her degree".

Producing tangible objects as a result of his/her labour is one thing, but is there any other way to, *activate*, much less *validate* this occupation 'artmaking', in our everyday world like that of a banker, or a doctor? I would like to find my own way of making a living AS AN ARTIST, not using it as a means, but as a *professional title*. I think about what, if anything, my 'profession' can share or trade with the people who do not have this 'profession'.²⁰

Aug 18, 98

The lady at the bakery asked me what I study at school. (They give a student discount on breads) "Visual Arts", I answered, "in the final year of a masters programme". The lady replied "Then what?" "Then What?" ? "Oh, just live as an artist", I said. It sounded disgustingly romantic and pathetic at once, but I didn't know what else to say.

July 11, 99

While I was by the river spreading out bunny puppets to take 3-D photos of them, a father with a little girl and a boy approached. I could hear him saying "...well I don't know dear, so let's find out". He asked my friend who was with me what I was doing. My friend genuinely didn't know how to answer to the question most appropriately FOR EVERYONE. He said, "Well, she is an artist". The father replied, "Well, that explains everything, doesn't it?" I thought, "Wow, it's like a business card; but if so, what a cop-out occupation I have. Spreading out bunnies by the river. No wonder we are not well-paid".

PROJECT : *Fund Raising Sales for 'Living in London, ON Project', 1998*

I first executed the *Fund Raising Sale* as a practical solution to cover my expenses for

some of the public intervention projects I was working on at the beginning of 1998. However, the dialogues that developed between the viewers and myself were quite revealing and I decided to continue it as ***Fundraising sales for 'Living in London, ON, 1997 - 1999 Project'***. I opened my 'store' once a week in the concourse in the Visual Arts building at the University of Western Ontario and sold merchandise, which raised the questions about 'artistic authority' as well as 'art and money'.

Week 1: Sale of "Narratives (with clothes)", prices varied

I sold narratives attached to my clothing. Each narrative had some relation to the clothing it was attached to. When the customer purchased a narrative, I ironed the article of clothing as a free service. I then took snapshots of the customers wearing my 'narratives'.

The highlight of this week's sale

A conversation between a customer and I: "Wow \$50.00 for a shirt is pretty steep, isn't it?" "It is not the shirt that is worth \$50.00, but the narrative about my former boss who told me to marry neither the first nor the second but the 'third guy'."

Week 2: Sale of "Potentially Good Bad Slides", €40 c each, \$1 for 3, \$1.50 for 5

I sold bad slides that I had kept -- the slides of my own artwork, art openings, and other miscellaneous slides. I provided a slide viewer so that the customer could view them for selecting. When the customer purchased a slide(s), I put a red dot on each slide to indicate the right way up as a free service.

The highlight of this week's sale

One customer (a supposedly prominent 'patron' of art in the community) at the store talking to the other: "I don't really know what this is all about, plus I am in hurry, but whatever I get from here, you have them, so-and-so, OK? I just want to support art."

Week 3: Sale of "Your fortune after Graduation (or in General)", €50 each

This week's sale coincided with the undergraduates' graduation show opening. I had kept fortunes, which came in fortune cookies that somebody gave me as souvenirs from Tokyo Disneyland a long time ago. I sold each of them in an envelope. The customer would pick an envelope from the box and find their fortune in it. Each fortune was written in English and Japanese and had a Disney character, which had nothing to do with the fortune. The customer could take the envelope for free for their personal use.

The highlight of this week's sale

No graduating students stopped by to purchase their fortunes after graduation.

Week 4: I was unable to have a sale this week, as I was busy. I put up a sign that said: "Due to a production problem, this week's fundraising sale has been postponed until next week. Sorry for any inconvenience — Fund-raiser."

The highlight of this week's sale – an artist can never know what kind of dialogue happens, if at all, around her conceptual sculpture.

Week 5: Sale of "Conversation with an artist over coffee", \$2.50 for 2 persons

I brought my own cappuccino machine for this week's sale. The customer was asked to follow the instruction as below:

1. Find a partner with whom to have your conversation and coffee with the artist.
2. Sit down in the chair provided.
3. When you have finished your conversation and coffee, please go and wash your mug so that the next customer can enjoy their coffee and conversation with me.

The conversation was recorded for free.

The highlight of this week's sale

While recording the conversations, I forgot to turn on the recording switch of the microphone.

Gala Christmas sale, December 3, 1999

Items sold:

- Christy Thompson / Shinobu Akimoto Limited edition art star card with autographs
¢ 75 each
- Exotic Christmas Decorations (tiny origami figures made with chocolate foil wrapper)
\$1.00 each
- Multi-purpose container for artmaking (empty yoghurt/tofu containers that I had collected over a year) ¢ 50 each
- Free postcards and envelopes (a collection of postage-paid mail, their destination blocked-out with a blank sticker) ¢ 25 each
- Christy Thompson's "good for you" trophy from her "good for you" project executed for off site @ toronto, 1998. Now hard-to-find, collectors item \$250.00

The highlight of this week's sale

Doug Mitchell, the work shop technician bought ALL my plastic containers for their potential use in sculpture classes on the school's account.

March 4, 99

Boredom is a prominent part of both retail business and performative intervention. The flashy image and appearance of both businesses are built on the massive void of "nothing happens".

Feb 5, 99

I don't really like performative interventions. It's draining to be the work itself and confront the viewers.

PROJECT : *Pay What You Can*, 1999

Pay What You Can was executed on the opening night of *What I Am thinking, I Have Not Thought Alone*, an MFA exhibition at the University of Western Ontario. I set up a desk with a printing calculator outside of the gallery, and suggested that people who came to the exhibition could “pay what they can”, before entering the gallery. Upon their payment, I issued a receipt on the calculator, which I stamped with my “*thanks for your support for art*” logo. (see plate) Nowhere was it mentioned that the payment was for viewing the exhibition, and the audience had the option to refuse to pay. When the opening was over, I left the accumulated change and bills on the desk with a label: “Shinobu Akimoto, *Pay What You Can*, 1999.”

The precursor of *Pay What You Can* is my *Fundraising Sale for Living in London, ON project*, a weekly routine/duty of running a ‘store’ with my questionable merchandise in the concourse in the Visual Arts building at the University of Western Ontario. As an installation artist, I am genuinely interested in investigating the somewhat difficult reconciliation between art and money, and feel compelled to re-examine the often oversimplified binaries such as ‘*art for sale VS art against commodification*’. By relocating the expected positions of the artist, viewers, and other external forces in the process of determining the value of art, I hope to occupy the middle ground between these two trajectories. Similarly, my interaction and exchange with the viewers is intended to reassess the expectations for ‘entertainment’ and ‘responsibility’ inherent in art viewing. Engaging in artmaking for me is constituted from my desire not just to entertain but also to be entertained for my daily survival. Like many other artists, I consider myself one of the viewers, both in the process of making the work and in the process of experiencing it. I would like to confuse the commonly expected relationship of who is to be entertained and how, who is responsible for what decisions and to what effect so that

once again, I may slip into the middle ground between maker and on-looker, provider and provided. My desire to keep exploring these 'undefinable' spaces/positions through my projects is perhaps at the core of my philosophy on daily living. ***Pay What You Can*** is an ultimate extension of the *Fundraising Sales* in developing these personal concerns into a collective discourse through a more direct, and therefore, a more controversial viewer involvement.

Aug 22, 98

Let's stop believing that I have a money problem like many artists do. I don't really have to worry about money ultimately as my parents are really supportive of me. I also happen to be the only child. It is not even my fault.

REFLEX 5 : I stopped watching TV, reading novels, looking at magazines, and going to movies over a decade ago. I had become somewhat disinterested in the 'modes' of information and entertainment that these media provided. Shortly after that, I also realised that I was not really interested in anything in particular, like what might be called a hobby, or a goal like a specific profession. For a while, I could not even think about what I wanted for my birthday. Consequently, I searched for different forms of entertainment for my daily survival, and eventually, came to learn one thing: the simulated experiences through knowing other people's lives and realities, as well as the ephemeral interactions and incidents may potentially generate non-tangible yet powerful experiences of pleasure and entertainment. The real motivation to restructure the artist-viewer dichotomy in my projects is *not* to subvert the mystified subjectivity of an artist and his/her maker-identity.²¹ I want to entertain, and be entertained in the *chaotic integration of identities*. Sophie Calle is quoted in Art at the turn of the millennium: "It

wouldn't be true to say I became an artist consciously. I try to find my own way out, which is my personal *therapy*. *The fact that it's art protects me -- it gives me the right to do things like that.*"²² (Italics added) I am often troubled by the common mentality and perception that in the name of art, one can do whatever she/he wants to do. On the contrary, if the word 'right' is replaced with 'justification' in the above quote by Calle, the italicised part is exactly my words.

PROJECT : *There is so much and only so much you can do Project (London, ON)*
1998 - 1999

In March 1998, Christy Thompson and I started to collaborate in ***There is so much and only so much you can do Project***, a series of performative interventions at various sites in the city of London, Ontario. Each site and act we had chosen made significant references to our daily life and artmaking. These performative interventions were meant to betray a self-confessed 'cynical view' of our experiences of displacement to the new and rather uninspiring environment. At the same time, the pieces portrayed our desperate attempts to find a space in the community for our daily/artistic survival. While the project served as a vehicle to express our personal struggles during the specific time period in our life, it also raised critical questions about the common perceptions of 'artists' and 'artmaking'. With these performative interventions, we also hoped to assist people in the community in recognising the quiet existence of contemporary artists, and the art scene that operates in the community.

Site 1: Restaurant "Sebastian's", Richmond street

On March 30th, 1998 at 6:30 PM, Shinobu Akimoto and Christy Thompson appeared at the restaurant *Sebastian's* located on the main street of downtown London, Ontario.

The restaurant is one of those 'urban gourmet delis' with numerous exotic dishes and beautiful desserts displayed in a long glass case, which stretches from one end of the store to the other. On the opposite side of the deli counter were breads, baked goods, and a variety of beverages and groceries for the customer to browse.

Upon their arrival, Akimoto and Thompson walked toward a table located almost in the middle of one dining area, took their coats off and put them on the chairs. Underneath the coat, Akimoto had on a pink tweed Channel-like suit while Thompson wore a black tight skirt and lapel jacket, from which a huge white corsage hung. Both had black heel shoes on. Without talking to each other, they marched toward the deli section through the shiny metal turnstile. Each of them selected a dish, waited while the server reheated it, then lined up at the cashier. After paying, they had to make a trip to the section opposite from their table to get a set of cutlery, a napkin, and a glass of water. The whole endeavour for getting ready to start dining took approximately fifteen minutes. Arriving at the table, they removed everything from the tray onto the table, and put the tray on one of the empty chairs by the table. Then, they sat down, took the plastic lid off the dish that kept the food warm, and put it away on the other empty chair. With great anticipation, each of them took one leisurely bite from her dish. Then, they pushed the unfinished dish towards the centre of the table, left the table and disappeared through the turnstile to order another dish. Sometimes, Akimoto and Thompson happened to come back to the table around the same time, and other times, they sat alone. They repeated the same routine over and over about two hours -- pasta arranged like a colour pallet, sculpturally mounted stuffed fish, dessert with delicate chocolate shavings -- the table accumulated a beautiful abundance of food until there was no more room left to accommodate another dish. Some of the customers seated around them left halfway through, apparently made uncomfortable by the spectacle; others kept peeking from

behind their newspapers. At the end they returned to the table with their last dish almost at the same time, finished a bite and stood up together. They walked back to the cutlery section and came back with bundles of forks. They approached the audience, handed a fork to each person, saying, "Please join the fine dining". Except for a few people who hesitated to dig in, the invited audience seemed to enjoy sharing this wild sampling picnic of gourmet food. The remaining food was doggie-bagged for take-home.

The apparent aspects of 'excess' and 'imprudence' in the performance could have easily been associated with the notorious reputation of contemporary art, [you can do ANYTHING in the name of art] or, even the historical acceptance of art as an 'excessive but justifiable' human act. In the *Sebastian's project*, the artists' need for entertainment was expressed in an overtly campy fashion; however, the ending of the performance (cleaning off of all the dishes) inevitably reflected the dominant inhabitation of the 'business' of daily living, which collided with the more glamorous notions of art. Also important was the shift in the role/position of the participants. In the end, the artists (entertainers) were decentralised while the work itself was sustained through the navigation of the audience, until somehow all the participants decided its end. Who initiated the work, who proceeded with the work, and who completed the work? Whether they chose to or not, everyone participated: the server, cashier, customers, and the audience.

During a panel discussion on performance art as a part of UAAC conference²³ at the University of Western Ontario (November, 1998), a criticism concerning the problem of 'privileged' and 'non-privileged' audience was brought up in relation to the *Sebastian's project*: the audience from the art institution, who knew Akimoto and Thompson and knew that they were 'performing', had the privilege to thoroughly 'enjoy' watching what

was happening whereas those who were not informed, who happened to be there did not. In my opinion, the signification such as 'privileged' and 'non-privileged' appears to come up short in the argument. The informed audience was 'privileged' in the respect that they were invited directly to participate in the 'making' of the work by sampling the food in the end. However, the non-informed audience had the privilege of experiencing this extravagant 'dinner theatre'²⁴ as a challenging or entertaining surprise. 'Unusual' conducts take place, in fact, more in the 'non-art' milieu, whether or not we are aware or informed. They thrive, without the reservation of 'art', and force us to keep thinking about the justification mechanism pertaining to our social and personal conduct and activities.

Site 2: John Labatt Visual Arts Centre, University of Western Ontario during UAAC, with a special guest, Andrea J Fashbaugh²⁵

October 27, 1998

Chair

Department of Visual Arts

University of Western Ontario

We are writing to inform you of our two performances in conjunction with the Fieldwork exhibition in the Artlab. **The first piece is scheduled for Friday November 6th from 8:30-10:30 a.m. on the first floor of the Visual Arts Building. During this time period, a local London disc jockey will be mixing soul music in the area of the student lounge on the first floor. As we realise that the UAAC conference will be running at this time, the sound level will be monitored and maintained at an acceptable level.** The second performance will take place at The Michael Gibson Gallery later the same day. This piece will have a duration of approximately one hour and serves as an important component to the Fieldwork performances. If there are any

questions regarding the performances please do not hesitate to contact us. **With respect to the first piece, we will be present to monitor the disc jockey's activities. At the time of this performance, we would prefer to be contacted personally if any questions or concerns should arise.**

We hope that you will be able to see and enjoy our interventions for the Fieldwork exhibition. An opportunity such as this is quite exciting and encouraging during our time in the Visual arts Program.

Sincerely,

Christy Thompson and Shinobu Akimoto

Friday November 6

Dear Christy, Dear Shinobu

I am writing to you both to apologise for this morning and to suggest that we meet next week to talk about this.

As I explained to Shinobu (I have not yet found Christy but hope to see you sometime today), The last ten days have been extremely demanding for me as Chair because of special reports and administrative duties generally, and I have not been able to keep up with my mail. If I had seen the letter you sent me, I would have spoken with you to get a better idea of what you were planning, and we could have arrived at some reasonable arrangement.

I believe in performance as an important contemporary art practice and have tried to be supportive of your work. I was aware that you were planning a performance (but did not

know the particulars) and was looking forward to it. I appreciate the modification you made to allow the conference presentations to proceed.

I hope that you will not allow this morning to keep you from enjoying the conference and the rest of your performance.

Yours,

Site 3: Michael Gibson Gallery

Shinobu Akimoto
c/o MFA programme, Visual Arts Dept.
University of Western Ontario
ph: 661-3440 (UWO), 858-2207(home)
fax: 661-2020 (UWO), 858-2207(home)

Attn: Mr. Michael Gibson
Michael Gibson Gallery

Dear Mr. Gibson

April 3, 1998

My name is Shinobu Akimoto, a graduate student in visual arts at the University of Western Ontario. I have made your acquaintance on a couple of occasions, such as at openings at your gallery. Today, I am officially writing to ask you to consider our proposal for a performance piece at Michael Gibson Gallery.

My collaborator, Christy Thompson (another MFA student in the programme) and I are planning to execute a series of performative intervention pieces at various sites in London, in the next few weeks. The series is called "Private acts that happen in public, a.k.a. There is so much and only so much you can do", and it is partially conceived for a graduate course called "Urban Art", taught by Prof. Colette Urban. The main objective of the course is to investigate alternative sites for art production and

display, which consequently encourage public/community interaction. All the sites chosen have some significance to our life and artmaking. We would like to use your gallery as one of the sites for our performance project because of the gallery's symbolic significance both to us, as young artists, and to the local art community. We would like to make our presence known to the local art-viewing public through your gallery, which is the artistic centre in the city. However, we are interested in doing so in such a way to challenge the conventional meaning and function of the "gallery" space. The content of our performance described below is intended to express this "dual desire".

1. Shinobu Akimoto and Christy Thompson appear at the gallery in our "regular studio" outfits with a can of wall paint, a brush, and other necessary materials.
2. We cover the floor of the main gallery with a strip of plastic, which would extend from the walls to 20 cm into the room.
3. We start painting the baseboard with the paint, which is exactly the same kind and the colour of the existing baseboard. It is ensured that no paint will extend beyond the baseboard. The plastic cover is to protect the floor from any possible paint drips.
4. When the entire baseboard is painted, we remove the plastic strip and leave the site.

We will ensure that no damage will be done to the wall or any other properties in the gallery. The performance requires neither a special construction of a space, nor a removal of the artwork in the gallery. The date and time of the performance will be determined according to your request. We are hoping to realise it in the month of April. We will invite an audience mostly from the university, but any audience from the public is welcomed during our performance. The performance will be documented on video by our technical assistant. Should you have any objection to any parts of our proposal, we are willing to change them to our mutual agreement.

I hope that our performance not only brings the attention of the art viewing public in London to the serious involvement of emerging artists in the community, but it also serves as a threshold of further interaction between contemporary artists and the community. We would feel truly honoured if we could perform at Michael Gibson Gallery to demonstrate our intention. I hope to hear from you soon so that we can further

discuss the possibility of this collaboration. I can be reached at the university phone number during the day and at my home number in the evening. You can also email me at sakimoto@julian.uwo.ca. Thank you very much for your time and attention.

Sincerely yours

Shinobu Akimoto

Carrying a bucket of house painting supplies, Christy Thompson and I arrived at the Gibson gallery during an opening reception of an exhibition. Amongst the people attending the opening, we started covering the floor with a strip of drop sheet along the walls, secured the walls with painter's tape, and painted the base board in the same colour as the existing base board. When we finished painting, we gathered all the equipment and materials we had used, attached "WET PAINT" signs on the floor, and left the gallery. The whole performance took approximately one hour. During the performance, some people spoke to us while we were rigorously at work, other people left us alone seriously mistaking that we were completing work to the gallery space for the present show. At one point, the paint fumes became so noticeable that the gallery attendant had to open the front window. In this intervention, we intended to convey our negotiation between two paradoxical desires -- the desire for the prestige of the gallery and the recognition through it, and the desire to challenge the conventional gallery mandates which do not always accommodate the kinds of art practice that Christy and I engage with.

Aug 19, 98

Went out to the Funk night with CT. Cannot get drunk tonight. AJ was mixing. We went to give her our contact numbers so that we can talk about our project in November. I hope she will do it. Started taking snap shots of CT and I doing daily stuff, using a remote. Hope they will turn out great. When taking snapshots in the bar, I was absolutely conscious of the "privileged" position that I was insisently creating for myself in public. I AM DOING THIS FOR MY ART. It is different from kids taking shots of each other in a club or wherever for kicks, like we used to do. What I am doing now is a "job" with a concrete and cool purpose. Even though no one cares and every one is just drinking, dancing, checking out people, I am different because I am in Visual Arts.

REFLEX 6 : Allied with the 'entertainment' analogy is the notion of 'filling in time'.

Marxist theory discusses how we have confused the purpose of labour with the need for living (material life). In the capitalist society, "material life generally appears as the aim while the production of this material life, labour, appears as the means".²⁶ Labour has lost any "semblance of personal activity"²⁷ to satisfy our personal needs (in an ontological concept), but it has become a means only to satisfy other needs (material life). I absolutely agree with the contemporary phenomenon of the displaced purpose of labour. However, what seems to be overlooked is the other important function of disciplined labour: how the 'activity' of labour is used and needed to 'fill in time' for living. On top of this, Marxism stresses the 'alienation' caused by the separation between the labourer and his products²⁸, but neglects the function of the 'labour institution' as a *place to belong to*. I am surprised that these needs are not included along with food, shelter etc. as essential to our existence. We need something to occupy ourselves and somewhere to belong to. Why, otherwise, do hobbies exist, do clubs exist? For some people labour is a hobby, the office is a club: a ritual for conducting one's daily living. I once heard on TV that people in Hong Kong never go on strike because "they like working". Provided that I am aware of the risks in this generalised commentary, I cannot entirely deny that their perception of 'living' seems to lie in a totally different sphere from

where it does in the Western mind.

Artmaking often functions for me in the same way work functions for some people. The element of 'duty' and 'ritual' in the idiosyncratic activities that occupy one's time seeks a legitimation which is extremely slippery and absolutely arbitrary. Here the same quote by Sophie Calle that appeared in REFLEX 5 might be useful for a different reason: "... I try to find my own way out, which is my personal therapy. The fact that it's art protects me -- it gives me the right to do things like that."²⁹ What fascinates me about some of the 'extra curricular' activities undertaken in the 'non-art world' is that they seem so creative, excessive and irrational all at once yet they are never claimed to be 'art'. Somehow, there is a valid reason and/or a purpose for them to do 'things like that', or, they don't even need any rationalisation.

Aug 14, '99

Received a postcard from TT from England, which ended once again with the similar line: "I really respect that you keep making a full effort to accomplish something.." She is referring to my having been working on degrees in art, as opposed to herself working at a bank to make a living, doing nothing particularly 'creative' and just travelling around on her holidays etc; the lifestyle she herself jokingly describes as "of bourgeois". To tell the truth, I have actually come to the point that I cannot help taking her recurring comments as anything but an implied insult. An ironic part is that she is the one who went to an art school in the first place and graduated from it a decade ago.

PROJECT : The House Rabbit Society Project, 1997 - 1999

When I first moved to London in September 1997, I was temporarily staying at someone's house. I kept looking for an apartment through the local weekly classified paper called London Pennysaver. Among all kinds of advertisements, I found a tiny

caption saying: *IS your rabbit happy or always locked in the cage? The House Rabbit Society 679-6164*. In the following week, it said: *RABBITS need hay as a part of their diet. The House Rabbit Society 679-6164*. As I kept looking for an apartment, I also kept looking for the ad from the house rabbit society. In some weeks, I could not find it, even after flipping through the paper five times. I realised that the mission of the house rabbit society is not that consistent. After a few weeks, I started collecting the ads. As usual, I created this weekly routine/obligation with the consciousness that this is, or may become, an 'art project'. To respond to my fascination with the House Rabbit Society's inconsistent ritual carried out by seemingly ambiguous reasoning and passion, I have been engaged with two projects.

Photo etching project, in progress

I decided to transform the collected ads into photo etched prints. The medium of etching, for me, serves as the best language to articulate the 'ambiguous reasoning and passion' mentioned above. It involves the meticulous methodology, which often reflects one's preoccupation with a process and ritual. Testing to find the perfect light exposure and acid strength, bevelling and burnishing each plate, taking hours to wipe the plate, making sure the dampness of the paper and the pressure of the press are correct -- the list continues forever. In the end, I feel confused about the purpose of the activity and the source of my satisfaction. Ironically, my etchings appear as what Allan Kaprow calls "artlike art".³⁰ However, I am quoting 'traditional artmaking' as one of my daily activities -- a reverse strategy to quoting 'non-art' activities (media) in one's artmaking in an attempt to eliminate the distinction between art and other things.

Pennysaver project, in progress

In May 1999 I started placing my "*thanks for your support for art*" logo (see plate) with

my phone number in the *Pennysaver* every two weeks over the course of the summer. I wanted to send my artwork into this banal yet curious 'world' of the community paper as a site of 'trade'. What I have so far experienced through this project is a strange sense of 'duty', which has become the *purpose* of this routine, a perverse pleasure to find my ad in the paper, and no phone calls to respond to my ad. When this duty-leisure project is over at the end of the summer, I will have the newspaper pages framed and exhibited.

REFLEX 7 :

**Visit us at the Canadian Pet Expo,
October 23rd, 24th & 25th, Exhibition
Place, Toronto. The House Rabbit
Society.**

I had imagined that there was actually no such a thing as the 'Rabbit Society' but that some eccentric person had been placing these ads. However, after seeing this particular ad one week, I decided to take a trip to Toronto to finally find out what the House Rabbit Society was all about.

The pet expo was an absolute frenzy. It was sort of like the art expo that I attended in Basel, Switzerland. All the small partitioned booths were showing their 'specialised' exhibits – reptiles, cats, specific kinds of dogs, a dog entertainment show, a pet quiz to win a trip to a 'pet-allowed' cottage in the North, or a case of canned cat food etc., and among them the House Rabbit Society. They had brought some rabbits in a cage, literature on house rabbits, and held scheduled lectures on the health and proper diet of rabbits. I was fascinated. This is more crazy and intriguing than artmaking. What particularly caught my attention was knitted objects sold to raise funds for "needy

rabbits": rabbit slippers, rabbit blankets, rabbit mailboxes and so on. I bought a rabbit finger puppet, which was affordable for me. Later my friend who accompanied me on this pet expo adventure suggested that I should commission the knitter lady (Mrs. Debra Dressler, a member of the House Rabbit Society), to make a large number of puppets. This sounded like a good idea, and I took the piece of paper that had her contact number.

When I called Ms. Debra Dressler in London, I tried to explain *everything* -- who I was, what I was doing, my thesis interest, installation as a form of art, contemporary artmaking as an academic subject, the issue of appropriation, the discrepancy between the common image of artmaking/artist and reality -- and that I was interested in using her bunny puppets in my art project. She said she was flattered to be 'involved'. She gave me an amazing offer and I took her up on it.

I have been questioned in the past if it is appropriate to inform my collaborator (including audiences) from 'outside of art institution' that what I am doing is artmaking, or that I am doing it for art. The criticism was made to me that as soon as this 'art cape' is thrown on, the whole action/interaction is rationalised, protected, and even privileged that it is no longer a 'bare happening'. My response has been that I do not intend to completely erase the line of consciousness between daily living and artmaking so that they unrecognisably 'blend'. In my art practice, daily living and artmaking inevitably conflate because my materials, sources, methodologies, processes, and venues all directly come from or go back to daily living. What I am compelled to do is to communicate the definite consciousness (intention) of making and/or showing work that attempts to articulate or sustain the existence of artmaking in the realm of daily living. In doing so, we, artists and non-artists, may be able to identify ourselves, if not with each other's activities

themselves, then with our respective *devotion* in our chosen activity.

PROJECT : 3-D bunny puppets photo project, ongoing

As one way to incorporate Debra Dressler's bunny puppets into my artwork, I started taking 3-D snapshots of the bunnies in different 'domestic' environment and settings. I had found a disposable camera in Japan, which takes phonogram photos similar to the glittering postcards sold at tourist sites. The way the sample photo looked and the idea of using this 'democratic' mass medium for making art immediately offered a 'double seduction'. Because Debra's bunnies are produced right in the context of her daily living (while sitting in the living room at night, driving with her husband in the car etc.) I chose the locations for the photo session that reveal a trace of my own daily living: in my apartment with my plants, on the kitchen counter with my toaster, by the river with the ducks behind my apartment, with the power tools in the workshop at school.

I keep and carry the bunnies in a ziploc bag (and most likely will display in that way with my photos) as Debra delivered them to me. This is to sustain the peculiar balance between the objects' 'uniqueness' (even the 'individuality' of each bunny) and their mass-produced quality, in an attempt to subvert any hierarchical perceptions among modes of production. There is also a strange shift in the notion of 'talent' or 'skills' that takes place in this collaboration. With the skill and knowledge that I do not have, Debra's bunnies are hand-crafted and thus can be called all 'original' art works; my 3-D photos are taken with a disposable camera, which, most likely, will enable everyone to make 'artistic' pictures. For this reason the two separate productions most profoundly manifest their respective 'power of making (or made objects)' when combined in one form. In such a form, one cannot easily decipher/determine the notions of 'talent', 'originality',

'authenticity', 'creativity', and ultimately, 'artistic value' derived from these criteria.

June 3, 99

Someone who came to my opening in Toronto said to me: "I like the conceptual part of your work, TOO". I was stunned. I never thought that anyone would perceive my secretary installation as ANYTHING BUT "conceptual". It made me feel good in a weird way that these stupid snapshots can stand as "visual art", too, without the help of a "clever story".

June 10, 99

I am so afraid of making 'boring' work. Sometimes, I feel like I must make 'twisted' work because it is MY work. The obligation to surprise, provoke, or entertain people. In this case, the instinctive desire, if there is such a thing, to purely 'create' something gets absolutely displaced. Does not matter what to make, it has to fulfil the consequential purpose of 'pleasing your audience'. It sounds as troublesome as making a painting, which matches the colour of the living room.

REFLEX 8 : I have no furniture such as a couch, a coffee table, a TV set, or a cabinet in my apartment in London, Ontario, where I currently reside as a graduate student in Visual Arts. It is partially because of my cultural back ground, and the fact that I have been 'travelling' for almost ten years. However, most importantly, it is because of the 'life style' I have chosen to adopt.

In my early twenties, I worked in an environment where everyone else was from a politically and environmentally conscious generation, the sixties. They were also 'artistically inclined', many of whom possessed degrees from art schools. As the youngest of the group, I was very much influenced by the way they conducted their daily living. At the same time, I quickly recognised the apparent paradox in living with a focus

on 'artistic creation', while trying not to support the consumer/material culture as a political gesture. Many of these friends struggled with this paradox and retreated to the country where they put their creative and artistic energy into their style of living.

I myself searched for a compromise between these desires 'to be creative' and 'to live in a *physically* modest way'. I tried different occupations in an attempt to satisfy my political intent. I did not want to contribute to the production of, for example, toasters knowing that everyone in our culture owns a toaster and does not need another. In the (supposedly) 'abstract' realm of art, I soon faced the same concrete problem of making things to be consumed, perhaps worse in a sense that these 'creations' had no immediate 'function' as toasters do. I recalled that my friend who made music on the computer considered his music as a 'toaster'.

Andy Warhol expressed a similar art-lifestyle paradox in the Philosophy of Andy Warhol:

*I really believe in empty spaces, although, as an artist, I make a lot of junk. Empty space is never-wasted space. Wasted space is any space that has art in it. An artist is somebody who produces things that people don't need to have but that he---for some reason---thinks it would be a good idea to give them....So on the one hand I really believe in empty spaces, but on the other hand, because I'm still making some art, I'm still making junk for people to put in their spaces that I believe should be empty: i.e., I'm helping people waste their space when what I really want to do is help them *empty* their space.³¹*

Just like the fictive self-identity of an artist, the constructed 'self sufficiency' and its ontological status of the *art object* have been long under the critical scrutiny of numerous critics and artists.³² Andy Warhol, for one, successfully demonstrated the contingency of such status of art objects through the production and distribution of his multiples.

However, has his problem expressed in the above quote been solved? Art objects such as his multiples *had to be made* precisely in order to sustain the claim for the contingent and imaginary value of the art object.

I often wonder if, one day, I will finally lose interest or energy in the constant negotiation between my life and art. "The decision to be an artist thus assumes both the existence of a unique activity and an endless series of deeds that deny it."³³

PROJECT : *I KEA living Project, in progress*

I have started making small furniture based on IKEA products. I am not replicating them exactly as the scale is my own, and the materials used are not quite the same. I also add some features such as casters and wire for moving them around. My research source is mainly the IKEA catalogue, from which I select the designs, as well as study their construction. I purchase furniture/products from IKEA as well, and alter them or simply integrate them with my handmade furniture. An important factor that influences the production is the cost: I try to ensure, albeit not always successfully, that I obtain the raw materials below cost of the store-bought products. In a potential installation of these newly made/purchased objects, I am going to include my own IKEA furniture that I have been using in my daily living as well. Inversely, I will use some of the furniture made for this project in my apartment after the show is down.

To a large extent, the attraction of IKEA stems from the socially/culturally informed, trend-driven desire for a specific style of living. However, what also makes IKEA an index for my practice is their concept reflected in the catch phrase they use on the cover of their catalogue -- "IDEAS YOU CAN AFFORD TO HAVE". I think about this

seemingly sensible, yet slightly cynical suggestion in relation to my artmaking. It implies affordability, capability and capacity, in other words, 'limitation'. While making the furniture, I constantly negotiate with my physical and conceptual capability: what is available and/or accessible in terms of the mode of production; to what degree can I or want to push my skills (and accept my own limitations); and finally, is the work compatible with or affordable in the philosophical context of my daily living -- a negotiation between my scepticism of excess objects (such as art) and my desire for 'making'. When selecting products at IKEA, I sometimes become completely lost in the even more ambiguous negotiation between my art project and my daily living: "Am I buying this for the project, or for my kitchen?" or "Will I want this if I am not using this for the project?"

We have accepted that the act of artmaking suggests an urge to embody and embrace one's 'ability' (talent), which designates and legitimises the significance of the activity. This indicates very little relation to 'necessity' or 'function' both in a physical and conceptual sense. I am interested in my own displaced reasoning for making, in the confusion between artmaking and other 'makings' that I undertake in my daily life, and in the arbitrary-ness of the designation of the two. In the construction of IKEA furniture, I am pushing the authority of specific 'objects' and the authority of specific 'intentions' by making *art objects*, which not only look, but actually are familiar and functional.

From the same IKEA catalogue, I cut out images of the furniture, which I either will make, purchase, or just think about. I then make colour copies of the clipped images, paste them on paper, and in pencil, black out everything else but the furniture. The drawing exercise touches the similar issues of 'economy' and 'practicality' in my artmaking as my furniture production does. While sometimes purely enjoying this more

'spontaneous' exercise, I am conscious that the drawings would function as, either preliminary studies, or the 'final art work' to compensate for the fact that I am not able to 'sell' my installation with my furniture.³⁴

I call my catalogue drawings 'Zen' drawings because of their physical and conceptual resemblance to my *imaginary* notion of such historical and cultural endeavours -- my drawings are simple, adhering to a strict parameter of a drawing method, while they demonstrate the significance of 'process' through my selection of the image and composition, as well as the trace of the spontaneous markmaking (brush strokes) within the adopted restrictions. The mass-printed catalogue images manipulated into my own drawings with a simplistic technique all look quite similar but never the same like Zen paintings. This twice questions the perceptions and definitions of 'originality', and ultimately, trivialises them. The popular perception of talent based on the ability to 'copy reality' seems to gain very little ground within this kind of practice. More importantly, my catalogue drawings attempt to investigate the condition or rhetoric of 'dignity' in creation (any creation). They function as an index to equate, for example, my mother's colouring 'virtuosity' that impressed me so much when I was little, and the 'artistic' signature we have learned to recognise in 'master' pieces. Designated as 'original' artwork, my photocopy drawings reveal my 'intention' and 'signature' as a contributor to the arbitrary mechanism behind the determination of aesthetic and artistic value.

Feb 22, 99

Some people criticised my intervention that involved money and "innocent" audiences, by using words like "moral", and "ethics", if I ever thought about what I am doing in the name of art in those terms etc. I am sorry, but I bet you 200%, I am hundred times more ethical than any of those people. Just look at how they and I eat. How people handle resources such as food (which is a real resource unlike money that is just a 'signifier' of resource) in this country. How they and I recycle. How we LIVE DAILY. I will never lose in this "moral

competition". I know if I will be punished, it would be for pouring solvent into the drain to make my prints, but not for charging people a buck or two in my intervention.

PROJECT : LRAHM Project, for L.M.R. (Last Month's Rent or Living Making Reflex), in progress

July 22, 1999

Shinobu Akimoto
#5 - 575 Ridout Street North
London, ON N6A 2R2
519-858-2207

Attn: James Patten, Curator for Contemporary Art
LRAHM³⁵

The following is a revised, final proposal for the intervention project at LRAHM in conjunction with my MFA thesis show scheduled for September 17 - 24, 1999. This show is going to be a multi-site intervention/exhibition and I would like to include LRAHM as one of the intervention sites.

The inclusion of LRAHM, a prominent public art-viewing site in my "multi-site" thesis project is extremely crucial to its objective. It reflects my way of dealing with the over-simplified, thus problematic notions of art venues such as inside / outside the institutions, or public / private spaces, a much discussed issue in contemporary art criticism. Rather than criticising the mandate of public galleries as contributing to such binary divisions, I would like to undermine the "signification" of spaces itself by "sneaking into" this conventional art-viewing site and "performing" my art. I consider this gesture as a form of negotiation, and a suggestion for a potentially entertaining interaction. In this sense, I have absolutely no intention to confront the on-going gallery exhibitions with my intervention. Rather, my desire is to let myself and my, perhaps "unconventional"

artwork, be present in this "formal" art-viewing site -- sort of a discreet yet persistent assertion of my existence as an artist who lives and works in this city. The viewer is given the option to interact with me or not as well.

To communicate the above-mentioned "discreet yet persistent" intention, I would like to work (volunteer) at the gallery gift-shop, and stamp the customer's receipt with my "thanks for your support for art" logo. The choice of the site, gift shop, also relates to my prevailing concern with another over-simplified notion of "art for sale VS art for commodification". This was a prominent issue in my previous art project *Pay What You Can*. The length of my voluntary employment will be determined with the consultation of LRAHM, but it should be no longer than the duration of my thesis exhibition mentioned above. I will also go through the necessary training required in business operation beforehand.

In conjunction with this intervention, I would also like to propose to display the framed pages from Pennysaver containing the same logo image from my concurrent project, possibly behind the reception counter. The close distance between the gift shop and the wall behind the reception may help some viewers to grasp the connection between my presence and the displayed work.

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to further discussion of my intervention project.

Sincerely yours

Shinobu Akimoto

June 18, 99

Despite of all the frightening "unknowns" awaiting, it feels good to think that I am moving on when this is all over. A new phase starts again where a new apartment will dictate what I should/could buy, how I could recycle things I already have (i.e. blinds, shelves etc), to make them fit to the new place. And a new job will determine my daily schedule, what to wear, what to learn and how to make art. Creative challenge within parameters. I can show my ability in taking advantage of, if not stretching, parameters. I can become ANYONE again but in distinctively MY way.

Notes

¹ I am referring to a type of perception of art represented, for example, in the following passage: art is an endeavour that belong to "real culture", which "pertains to the enlightenment and refinement of taste required by *intellectual and aesthetic training*..." [Dennis Alan Mann, ed. The Arts in a Democratic Society, 1997, P. 8]

² Johanna Drucker, Theorizing Modernism: visual art and the critical tradition (New York: Colombia University Press, 1994) P.110.

³ The natural question here would be "Why, IKEA, not, for example, Sears". The thorough analysis to provide answers to this question would not be feasible in this paper; however, I touch a little about the significance of IKEA as an index for my thinking and practice in the artist's statement of *IKEA project* on p. 39

⁴ The word 'happy' here may be replaced with 'content'. I am aware that the term or notion of 'happiness' is broad and rather subjective; however, I have strategically chosen this word because of its powerful effect as a signifier, which absolutely contradicts the slippery nature of its 'meaning' (signified), in order to make the reader rethink their own perception of 'happiness'.

⁵ The other day I was on the bus with my artist friend, who was quite seriously asking me for my opinion on one of her works "chocolate poles" (numerous chocolates mounted on iron rods). I could not help being extremely conscious about what the people sitting around us might be thinking of our non-sensical but heavy-sounding discussion about "chocolate poles".

⁶ not in a conventional sense.

⁷ I recalled this incident in relation to a point made by Dave Hickey in The Power Plant lecture that I attended in 1998: "Art thrives not in its object form but in discourses".

⁸ Johanna Drucker makes an interesting point in Theorising Modernism, p.109, that the "long-lived and tenacious" image of "romantic, self-willed, and tormented" artist may have been caused by the fact that "no figure embodies and promotes the fantasies and fictions of the bourgeois individual under capitalism more dramatically than that of the artist".

⁹ Suzannah Lessard, "towering presence", VOGUE September 1998: p.426.

¹⁰ Toronto-based artist.

¹¹ Kristine Stiles, Peter Selz, ed., Theories and documents of contemporary art: a source book of artists' writings (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) p.780.

¹² I sometimes face a similar problem with other statements by some artists, particularly when they are taken out of context. For example, I argue that statements like "how can arts become a meaningful part of everyday experience?" [Mary Jane Jacob, "Outside the Loop", Culture in Action (Bay Press, 1995)] or even more famous "everyone is an artist" [Joseph Bueys] may convey a sense of 'righteousness' of art and artist.

¹³ Allan Kaprow, ed. Jeff Kelley, Essays on the blurring of art and life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) p.201.

¹⁴ Peter Burger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) p.53. Burger implies that Avant-Gardist intent to subvert any notion of 'individualism' in production (i.e. producer) or reception (i.e. recipient) of art resulted in a sense of 'solipsism' as a reverse effect: (now that producers and recipients no longer exist.) "All that remains is the individual who uses poetry as an instrument for living one's life as best as best one can."

¹⁵ This 'site-specificity' I am suggesting here goes beyond the familiar contemporary criticism of the "gallery space being a 'protected' site with a function to legitimate *whatever goes in there*".

¹⁶ Organisations with the function of gallery that are funded by Canada council.

¹⁷ Dave Hickey, Air Guitar: Essays on Art & Democracy (Los Angeles: Art Issues. Press, 1997) p.109.

¹⁸ cf. Marxism

¹⁹ See p. 21, Project : Pay What You Can

²⁰ Jean Baudrillard's work, such as The Mirror of Production (Telos Press, 1975), might be a useful reference for the further discussion regarding tangible (material) vs non-tangible (symbolic) exchanges.

²¹ The "maker identity" of the artist has been extensively deconstructed and reconstructed by both artists and theorists throughout the century. Profound examples would be: Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, and Jeff Koons for artists, Walter Benjamin, Michael Foucault, and Roland Barthes for theorists.

²² Uta Grosenick, Burkhard Riemenschneider, ed., Art at the turn of the millennium, (Taschen America, 1999) p.90.

²³ University Art Association Conference

²⁴ A description used by Patrick Mahon during the panel discussion.

²⁵ London-based disc jockey, specialised in soul/funk selection

²⁶ T.B. Bottomore, ed., trans., Karl Marx: Selected writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy (New York: McGraw-hill Book Company, 1964) p.175.

²⁷ Bottomore, p.174.

²⁸ Bottomore, p.167.

²⁹ Grosenick, Riemsschneider p. 254.

³⁰ Kaprow, p.201.

³¹ Andy Warhol, The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again) (San Diego: A Harvest Book, 1975). p. 144

³² Drukcker p. 61 - 65.

³³ Kaprow, p. 81.

³⁴ cf. Christo's drawings for his large-scale wrapping installations

³⁵ London Regional Art & Historical Museums, London, Ontario

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