

# ARTFORUM

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## JOHN MARRIOTT

John Marriott's "Art that says Hello," on view throughout Toronto this past August, was a friendlier spin on the institutional critique that has characterized his burgeoning body of work. Marriott, a lawyer-turned-artist, ascended to notoriety after participating in a 1995 group show of young Toronto artists at The Power Plant, "Beauty #2." He was immediately offered a solo show at the same gallery, in which he presented a critique of the self-legitimizing mechanisms that art and corporate cultures use to reproduce themselves (and exclude others). *You tell me your history, I'll tell you mine* features a deep-fried Grecian urn, and *Critical Tragedy* has a stage with violent images from the covers of rock albums set up for a business presentation with easel and marker. He then found himself at an impasse in his short career; though he had gained local recognition, he was not yet a candidate for the collections of larger institutions, and his unwieldy, iconoclastic work was not viable for commercial dealers. This situation inspired Marriott to disseminate his work outside the conventional system. In his latest effort, the artist morphed into Art the streets. Wearing a bright yellow shirt and a green baseball cap bearing the slogan "Art that says Hello," he entreated passersby to partake of his less-than-essential services.

Marriott ensconced himself at a number of sites and events with one of three interactive contraptions in tow. In one, viewers were invited to climb a ladder and peer out a picture window attached at the top, then remark on "what things look like from up there." In another, people stepped on a black-and-white image of the moon's surface and had their feet photographed dwarfing the craters beneath (each subject was offered a photo in exchange for his or her participation). And in a third setup, the artist offered to polish people's shoes yellow, explaining that "in the old country,



John Marriott, "Art that says Hello," 1997.  
Performance view.

yellow shoes are good luck." (No takers to date.) Each time, grinning company-man Marriott engaged his "customers" in conversation, though he accepted no remuneration for his services.

Marriott's workaday nonspectacle drew a broad audience of curious Torontonians who seemed to delight in the work's accessibility and spontaneity while straining ever so slightly to apprehend an art experience that offered neither epiphany nor didacticism, but simply an extra-daily experience, a look at life from a slightly different perspective. The humility and subtlety of Marriott's latest interventions seem at odds with the occasionally heavy-handed cynicism of previous works. "Art that says Hello" offered the artist as an average Joe whose job it was to provide the general public with courtesy in the form of art—a far cry from Marriott's malcontent critique of the institution from within. The artist's social conscience and parody of the entrepreneurial spirit made this a successful alternative to conventional structures of receiving art. In the promotional video for "Art that says Hello," a wry Marriott muses, between bites of a grilled cheese sandwich, "You can't legislate courtesy." Thank goodness.

—Lisa Gabrielle Mark