



John Marriott's roving See The Sights cart promotes an open state of mind.

Hip Art That Says Hello takes to T.O.'s streets

By DEIRDRE HANNA

At its best, performance art takes the form of unexpected, thought-provoking and often disturbing or profound public happenings.

But when performance pieces head into more private spaces, the confrontational and irrational elements that make for truly dynamic moments can be, well, more than a little hard for a captive audience to take.

And when artists strive for a more viewer-friendly polish — think Laurie Anderson, Spalding Gray and David Byrne — the work crosses the line into the more mainstream realms of theatre or music. It may be great, but it ain't performance art.

Quirky revival

There's something about the summer of '97 — maybe the drought, maybe the over-the-top actions of Mike Harris and company — that seems to be sparking a quirky little revival of street-level performance art activity in Toronto. Daniel Olson's sporadic Boardwalk interventions in Mercer Union's King-and-Spadina window aim to get a rise out of casual passersby (see page 83), while John Marriott's Art That Says Hello series of roaming performances, which he dubs Art Courtesy Provider, bring off-the-wall actions to various Toronto neighbourhoods.

It's a refreshing development.

Marriott started his series by offering free shoe shines — with yellow paint — and moved on to take

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JOHN MARRIOTT: ART THAT SAYS HELLO, a series of street performances. This Saturday (August 23), **SEE THE SIGHTS** makes an appearance outside the Royal Ontario Museum (100 Queen's Park) from 1 to 2:30 pm. Free.

kitsch photos of feet on a lunar backdrop for his Picture Yourself On The Moon. For his current piece, See The Sights, Marriott wanders from his home to tourist destinations — this Saturday (August 23) it's the Royal Ontario Museum — with a yellow-painted aluminum stepladder on a wheeled cart. Marriott invites viewers to climb the ladder and observe the local sights through a small frame while he provides commentary.

"Most adults only get up one or two steps. It's all part of the silliness," says Marriott. "It's not really an observation tower like the CN Tower, it's a frame of mind."

"I'm inspired by people like Graeme Kirkland busking with his plastic buckets, and Crad Kilodney, who used to sell his books on the street with these absurd signs. What I'm doing relates to busking, although I'm not asking for money. The feeling I want to generate comes from the act of giving something — a shoe shine, a photograph or a guided tour of a neighbourhood."

Marriott may be paying the bills by working as a freelance graphic designer with local ad agencies — a not atypical day job on Toronto's vi-

sual arts scene — but in most respects his career path has been far from ordinary. Marriott followed up his York University fine arts degree with law school, where, he says, "I learned how to read and absorb all of the really dry, theoretical stuff."

But rather than pursuing a lucrative law gig while becoming a Sunday painter when he graduated in '95, Marriott went straight from Osgoode to make serious inroads on the gallery front. Within a year, he'd exhibited at some of Hogtown's major institutions — a solo show at the Power Plant and numerous high-profile group shows, including gigs at the Royal Ontario Museum and Art Metropole.

Really active

This year he's slowed down, showing in a group show of artists' multiples at the Art Gallery of Ontario — "I was really active in the mail art movement when I was at art school," he explains — and doing his guerrilla performances on Toronto's streets this summer.

"I've always been painfully aware of the high culture/low culture split, and I work both sides of it," says Marriott.

"This project happened so fast — I just started gathering materials for it six weeks ago — that I'm still figuring out where I was going when I started. The more I talk about it, the more I understand it."

"This is warm and fuzzy post-conceptualism. Some people feel a greater entry into the work if they have a theoretical premise, but this work is more intuitive." ●