



Finders Keepers

JENNIFER MARMAN and DANIEL BORINS'S
post-revolutionary take on the vernacular

BY BEN PORTIS

As last winter passed into spring, the artists Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins were intent on making every minute count. They had just finished an immense installation for Canada Blooms, Toronto's annual flower-and-garden show, hard on the heels of exhibitions at the National Gallery of Canada and the Art Gallery of York University. Several other projects were in varying states of completion or looming on the horizon. Because Marman and Borins do not yet say no, either to themselves or to others, a daunting set of commitments stretched out over the next two years. They keenly sensed the clock ticking away. Another rite of spring, filing tax returns for Implosion Post Media Ltd., the registered legal entity of the Marman-Borins collaboration—something that would pull them away from their preferred tasks for the better part of a week—also presented an opportune occasion to reassess their resources and reflect on their practice.

It was a shared obsession with the act of being artists, disbelief in buzzwords like *deskilling*, *post-studio* and *relational aesthetics*, that bonded Marman and Borins a decade ago at the Ontario College of Art and Design. Each came with a prior university degree, hers in philosophy, his art history. Their decisions to return to Toronto and study sculpture had everything to do with forming materials and the creative setting of the studio. In 2000, while students, they formalized their collaboration under the moniker Marmco International. Like N.E. Thing Co.—Iain and Ingrid Baxter's Vancouver-based corporation, active from 1966 to 1978—Marmco steeped



LEFT AND ABOVE: Installation views (details) of *Project for a New American Century* 2009 Mixed media Dimensions variable ALL PHOTOS COURTESY GEORGIA SCHERMAN PROJECTS PHOTOS COREY GOODYEAR

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Installation view (detail) of *Project for a New American Century*
2009 Mixed media Dimensions
variable PHOTO COREY GOODYEAR



itself in information, communication and models of transaction as strategies to bridge the divide between art and life. It backfired. “We spent all our time maintaining the website,” they recall. They eventually dropped the corporate posturing and began working under their own names in 2003.

Marman and Borins also share a history of provocation. They were part of a clique that in 1999 took control of the Ontario College of Art and Design student council and put its operating funds into Art System, a radical exercise in collective exhibition-making and artistic free agency, initiated at a moment when Toronto’s established artist-run organizations were burrowed into niche agendas and institutional discourse. Art System was “such a motley crew of people,” the artists recall. “Everyone was highly individualist, with totalized styles, nothing to do with the others. There was no pressure to conform into a movement.”

Borins imaginatively correlated Art System’s successive incarnations into a progression of geopolitical statements. Some found his style brash; the experiment expended itself within three years. The instigators moved on (Marman and Borins graduated in 2001) and political orthodoxy was restored at the college. Since Art System was anti-bureaucratic, anti-document and anti-archive, scarcely a trace of its activities survives today, but it was a watershed in Toronto artist culture. One upshot was that in 2005 the newly launched Drake Hotel hired Borins as its visual-arts programmer. He implemented a non-stop mix of underground exhibitions, performances and critical forums that remains the hotel’s template for cultural engagement. Meanwhile, he hung tight with his Art System co-conspirator, the digital nihilist Jubal Brown, and produced a number of computer-crafted,

ultra-saturated, didactic/sardonic video works. These culminated in Borins’s *Wigga of Mass Deception* (2003), a 27-minute salvo of bombastic imagery and mandalic structure aimed at the Bush White House and the hubris that thrust America and the world into a miscalculated war on terror.

The video epitomized what has become Marman and Borins’s “post-revolutionary” attitude. Together, the artists restructure imagery and ideas gleaned from the vast and often vulgar field of the vernacular. They are skeptical of chimeric promises of change and even regard the stuff of the present, whether material, iconic or virtual, as transient, a way station to yesterday, a finders-keepers wasteland wherein they claim creative domain and divulge no fixed address. History, for them, is a fuzzy proposition. This profound ambivalence might explain why the work of Marman and Borins poses difficulties for those who prefer that politics in art be constructive and empowering.

They regard their practice as “generative,” every project a building block that contributes to their technical skills and experience, and also to the set of ideological tenets that are the heart of their repertoire. Consequently, artworks and ideas from earlier stages of their collaboration often reappear in updated guises or reconsidered contexts. In the National Gallery of Canada’s impressive 2008–09 group exhibition “Caught in the Act,” which examined participatory strategies and tendencies in contemporary art, Marman and Borins were represented by a tight selection of works spanning five years, one of a few sideshow elements (others belonged to Geoffrey Farmer and the trio BGL) that peppered a more typically elaborated thematic show. The National Gallery has made an emphatic commitment to Marman and Borins: two years ago it acquired the first product of their post-Marmco phase, *Presence Meter* (2003), a clinical-looking grid of 2,040 dials whose needles quiver according to the proximity of the viewer.

Also part of “Caught in the Act” was the sculpture *Beyond Good and Bad* (2004), modelled after the alien monolith that incites tribal apes to murder in the “Dawn of Man” prologue to Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 film classic *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Marman and Borins converted the monolith into an arcade game: the viewer who chooses not to be a bystander can plant his or her feet on a pair of cartoon-like pawprints and enter a private column of sound. The gleefully inane reward is Richard Strauss’s *Also sprach Zarathustra*—often thought of as the anthem of Kubrick’s film—but in the jazz-funk arrangement recorded by Deodato in 1972. The work’s title alludes to Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*; however, Marman and Borins bypass moral ultimatums and take on a matter of judgment: good art against bad. Another viewer, the one who walks away, is equally implicated. “With *Presence Meter* and *Beyond Good and Bad*,” the artists note, “we were gaining control of engagement, seeing how a work controls a receiver, addressing a dismissive culture.” Woe to those who rush to easy conclusions.

Next was an installation that fully exploited the potential of the Art Gallery of York University, which, under the directorship of Philip Monk, was already designated an iconoclastic, anti-authoritarian precinct. The project was intended to be “completely analog, steeped not necessarily in conceptual art but definitely built on theoretical premises,” Marman and Borins point out. “It was going to be hand-built. There was going to be something oppressively physical about it.” *Project for a New American Century*, which was on view in early 2009, positioned the venue as the



symbolic nucleus of the university’s intellectual-ideological-architectural complex. Outside, York teetered through a protracted strike, adding time-liness to a show designed as a monument to crisis.

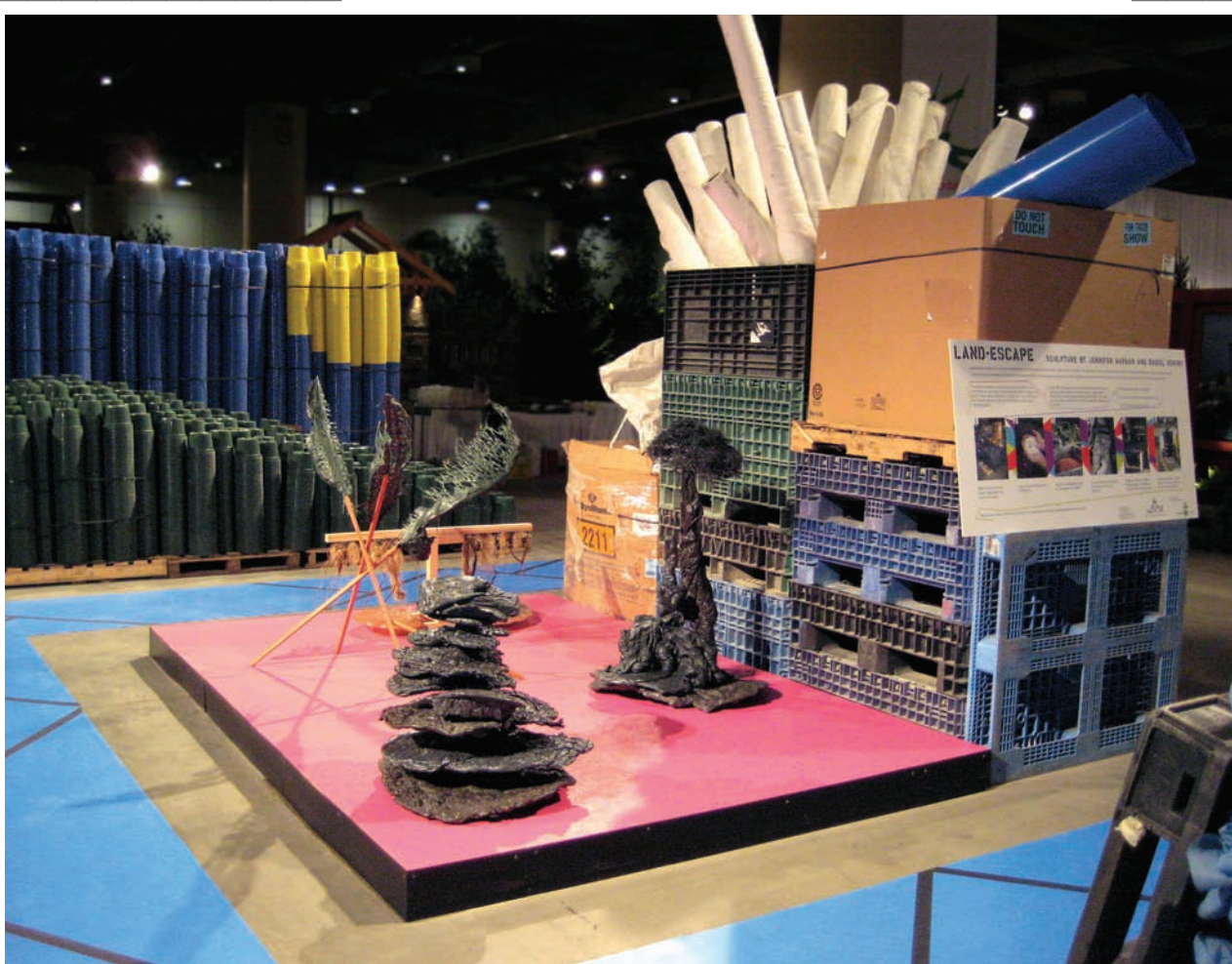
At the heart of *Project for a New American Century* was a cell contained within the cube-shaped base of a simulated-concrete turret. A passageway behind the cramped and foreboding threshold of an exhibition that sculpturally emulated York’s brutalist 1960s campus master plan. The octagonal top of the tower ambiguously met or intersected with the ceiling plane, its front facade containing three high, reflective “windows” that visually extended twin rows of bare fluorescent bulbs (made to look like permanent gallery fixtures) into infinite vectors of light. The cell was visible through a lower, similarly proportioned glass window laced with fine wire; as one shifted to survey the details inside, it was like looking through a grid. As a viewer approached the window, the view expanded from a coherent Josef Albers-like geometric abstraction on the back wall to a jumbled, four-sided homage to Frank Stella, Sol LeWitt and Al Held. The sole item of furniture inside was a sloping, brushed-aluminum bunk/bench that jutted out from the mural. All of this, plus assorted black-and-white cubes on the floor and more fluorescent lights on the ceiling, was optically encompassed and distorted by a quarter-sphere security mirror. Notably, there was no door.

The environment was fashioned after penal chambers rumoured to have been devised by anti-Franco anarchists during the Spanish Civil War—Cubo-Futurist habitats inspired by avant-garde art and intended to erode the captive’s grasp of reality and subjectivity. Marman and Borins push this



ABOVE: *Momento Monkey* 2007
Lambda print 73.6 cm x 1.02 m

TOP: Jennifer Marman and Daniel Borins with a collection of ephemera assembled by the artists and Castor Design PHOTO COREY GOODYEAR



Land-Escape (detail) 2009 Mixed media Dimensions variable

speculation—which runs counter to our assumptions about evil fascism versus noble socialism in the 1930s—forward in time to compound with late modernism and the incipient postmodernism evident in the painting, sculpture and architecture of the 1960s. The volume of the cell approximates that of the architect and artist Tony Smith’s six-foot-tall steel cube *Die* (1962), which he famously insisted was neither “monument” nor “object,” suggesting that hollow minimalist forms conceal psychosis and therefore are figurative. The apparatus of suppression is an obscure motif in contemporary sculpture; examples such as Barnett Newman’s *Lace Curtain for Mayor Daley* (1968) and Hans Haacke’s *U.S. Isolation Box, Grenada, 1983* (1984) remind us that Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib are only the latest in a long, ignominious line of form-follows-function horrors. The tower’s architectural double entendre was echoed at the other end of the gallery by an ornamental concrete screen that also described an upended penitentiary floor plan.

In the adjoining gallery, elements derived from the cell and miscellaneous handmade sculptures that recall Donald Judd, Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, Robert Smithson and Richard Artschwager, related but dissimilar artists, were laid out. Any of the pieces might also be an architectural fragment. Marman and Borins land equivocally between Morris’s dialectics of contingent form (*Permutations*, 1967) and anti-form (*Continuous Project Altered Daily*, 1969). The mandate of *Project for a New American Century* (titled after a neo-conservative American think tank) demanded that no rearrangement ever occur. Thus this was a tactical repertoire, filled with instruments of inquisition rather than inquiry. Similarly, four immaculate square canvases elegantly abstracted the four major com-

ponents of the installation—tower, cell, screen and object layout—underscoring the simultaneous conditions of hypothesis and realism.

The duo’s mammoth project at Canada Blooms, largely unseen by the contemporary-art constituency, was on view for a mere five days. Still, *Land-Escape* hardly looked ephemeral. Built using a forklift, pallets and baling straps, the piece consisted of artifacts extracted from the reconstitution cycle of post-consumer plastic waste—in this case discarded and recycled flowerpots—arranged to imitate natural forms. There were multiple horizons, eccentric topiary, blue sky and billowing clouds—classic artistic signifiers of landscape. *Land-Escape* teased the garden show’s supreme artifice, showing us flora and fountains in the last days of winter, subtly baiting the onlooker with a comforting composition before posing questions like: what’s wrong with this picture? Or sculpture?

The artists’ first outdoor work, *In Sit You*, which was presented in 2006–07 at the Toronto Sculpture Garden, relied on similarly good-natured passive-aggressive tactics (the duo think of this in terms of “payoff”). A colour-coordinated set comprised of a park bench and a mechanized billboard lured viewers onto and before a pair of striped abstractions, one static, the other kinetic. The artists will further refine their critique in their first “site-generative” permanent public sculpture, due for installation at Downsview subway station in Toronto in summer 2010. *Dodecadandy* will crown a pedestrian pathway reclaimed from a long-neglected bus right-of-way with a monumental geodesic dandelion, its metal fluff strewn down the lawn—ashes to ashes, weeds to weeds.

“It’s the investigation of potential, outcomes,” Borins and Marman say of their work. “We’re pushing out the boundaries of what space is. Every once in a while we go too far. But it comes from imagining ourselves in space, viewing the work and discussing what effect that has.” ■

See more works from these artists at canadianart.ca/marman