



**entrepreneur alone
returning back
to sculptural form**

**an interview with
geoffrey farmer
by andrew bonacina**

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Torino, Italy: UOVO 13 2007: 254-281.

ANDREW BONACINA: Airliner Open Studio, your recent show at Catriona Jeffries Gallery in Vancouver, contained many characteristic elements of your practice – from the making visible the processes of construction throughout the course of the exhibition and the treatment of the gallery as stage-set, to the use of handmade crafts as a form of set-dressing. How did this project begin and develop?

GEOFFREY FARMER: I had been working on a project, which was to take place on a commercial airline flight. During some of the research I found two brothers who had a 737 airliner set that they were storing out on their farm just outside of the city of Vancouver. I decided to go out to look at it and it ended up being quite an amazing place, an old mushroom farm with a huge covered outdoor area full of abandoned machines, boats and trailers, including this very mouldy airplane set which was just this unrecognisable pile of material right next to a bull in a pen. It had been used for filming in the 1980s and had been given to them as payment for a debt. The brothers let me borrow it if in return I would clean it up. So I decided to bring it to Vancouver and assemble it at Catriona Jeffries Gallery and use it as a kind of rehearsal space.

I liked the fact that the set was composed of real airplane parts as well as fabricated components. After cleaning and putting the set together on a raked platform, I began working on it during the night over the course of the exhibition, recording my actions. I then presented these the day after in the form of video works, sculptural configurations and drawings. It was a project in which ideas were being actively worked out in front of the viewer over the duration of the exhibition.

**I was interested in representing
an oscillation between representation
and abstraction**

AB: What type of actions did you perform for these video works?

GF: The first actions I recorded were of cleaning, very simple things like a hand appearing with a cloth. I also made a video of my hand appearing between two seats forming different shapes, faces and gestures; I was trying to make it not look like a hand. It was something I once did on a turbulent flight to entertain a child who was crying. I remembered it while I was cleaning and decided to re-enact it. I was interested in representing an oscillation between representation and abstraction. The video documentation began like this but by the end a narrative began to emerge.

**I think some works operate
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way than others**

AB: These simple gestures for the camera make me think of the 1960s and '70s studio-based video practices of artists such as Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci, where the private space of the studio is used to frame the actions later presented to the audience in the form of documentary video pieces. Were these an influence?

GF: There is phenomenological quality to these works that I like, a directness that is startling and deceptively simple. They opened up a new realm of inquiry for me as a student around questions of artistic process and activity. I also found this in works by artists like Cindy Sherman, Paul McCarthy and Robert Filliou. They were making manifest a thinking process and including it in different ways within their work. As well, at some point, there is a question about psychological make-up, and I really identified with this.

AB: In a sense, projects such as *Airliner Open Studio* see the studio transferred to the gallery and the exhibition space becoming a site of production. Has the time and space of the exhibition itself always been important to the way in which you work?

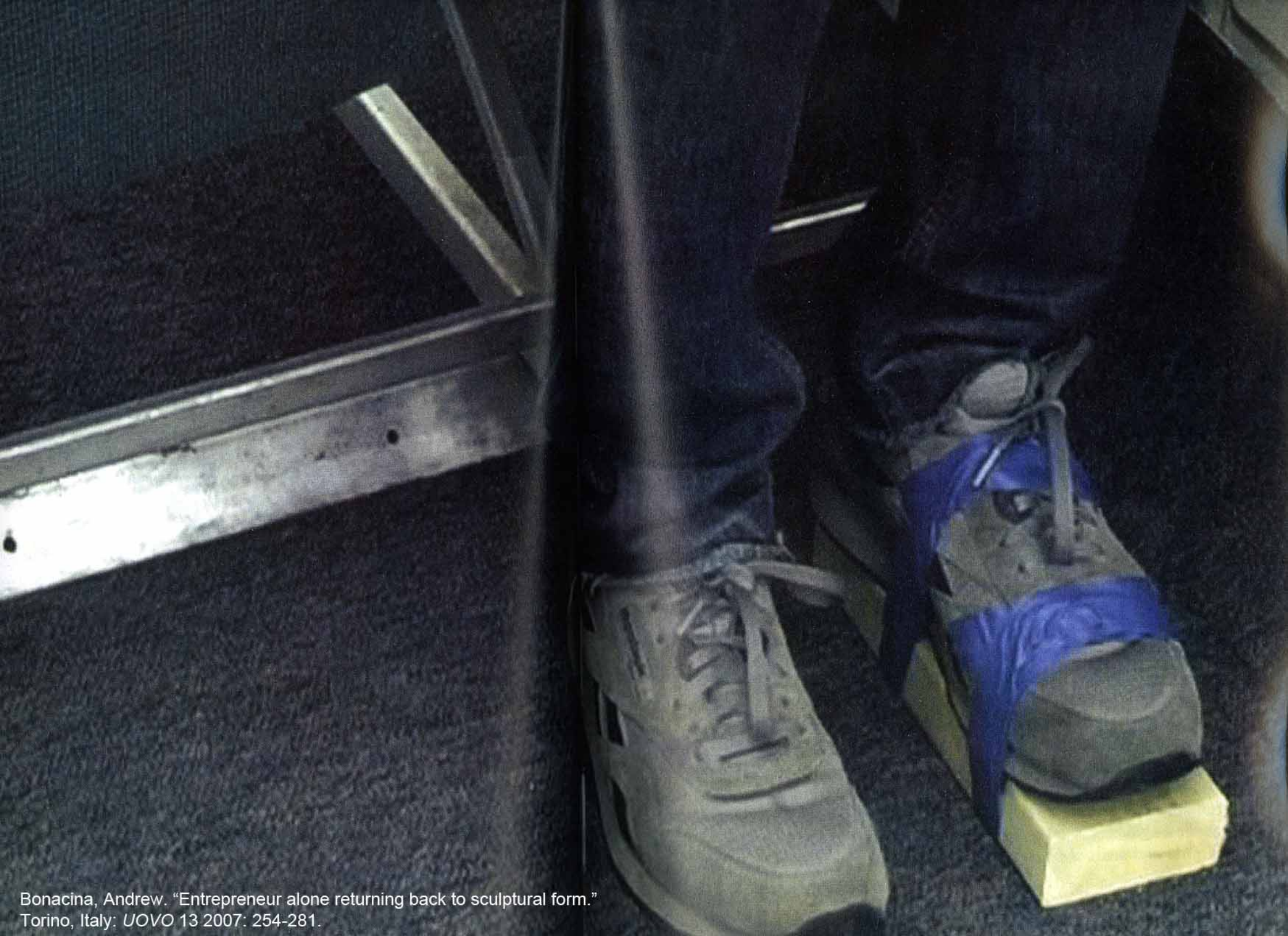
GF: I think some works operate more consciously in a spatiotemporal way than others. I have always included elements within my working process that illustrate my interest in a type of immediate context and how this might participate in the work's development and form. I think it should be OK to go back and rework. This is not to say that I am not also interested in more autonomous works that attempt to transcend context, but I tend to see work as temporary forms and I am interested in the progression of a work over time.



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AB: A criticality of accepted positions and institutional frameworks is something that underpins much of your practice. In *Wash House: Even the foul dirt and putrid stains of your life know their fate!* (2004) for example, you installed a functioning laundry service for students inside the Charles H. Scott Gallery in Vancouver – a gesture which disperses the traditional relationship between the art object, its function, the institution and the audience.

GF: This piece was based on an idea I had about giving people the opportunity to perform a task in an historical setting. It is a piece that partially evolved out of my interest in Dr. Bronner's Magic Soap, which is a well-known soap here on the West Coast. Emanuel Bronner was a third-generation master soap-maker from a jewish orthodox family in Heilbronn, Germany. He rebelled against his father and came to the United States in the 1920s; his parents and most of his family died in the Holocaust.



He began to make soap on the West Coast and included on his packaging these eccentric, verbose proclamations and statements, reflecting his spiritual and philosophical beliefs that we are "ALL-ONE".

Around this time I had also found a picture drawn in a Japanese internment camp in British Columbia of a "Wash House", and I decided to recreate it within the gallery, plumbing it with a modern washing machine and dryer and a supply of Dr. Bronner's soap. Anyone could sign out a key and use the appliances for two-hour time periods. For the most part you couldn't see into the shack, but you could hear the machines working if you came into the gallery. The poster replicated some of Dr. Bronner's text, but its design was based on the poster put up around Vancouver in the 1940s informing the Japanese of their internment.

AB: Participation is more integral to an ongoing work such as *The Hunchback Kit* – a collection of “props” or objects that can be used in “conceptual adaptations” of Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Is it your intention in this piece for the viewer to become a protagonist of the work?

GF: I think the viewer brings their knowledge, or imagined understanding of the narrative, which is then compared to the work presented. It has the function of conflating an imagined narrative with my own interpretation of the text or my transference of it onto the institution.

AB: So it relates more to the structures and institutional processes of the museum – a metaphor for the way in which narratives are constructed, etc?

GF: Yes, I believe it shifts dynamically between the way in which the viewer, artist and institution collaborate in the construction of narratives.

AB: In these more participatory projects, your role shifts necessarily between that of director and actor. To what extent is your own identity and personality enacted through the process or is this always deferred through other characters or alter-egos?

GF: I think the staging of these works illustrates a certain self-consciousness that surrounds these spontaneous acts. Although I never feel like I am acting or directing, I am always aware that I am. I think the relationship established in my work between my presence/absence and my spontaneously staged actions becomes a question about authenticity and the function of a work of art.



ATTENTION

NOTICE TO ALL PERSONS

TAKE NOTICE that beginning on November 19, 2004
a **FREE LAUNDRY SERVICE** will
be provided at the **CHARLES H. SCOTT GALLERY**.

WASH HOUSE

Did you ever think that it would come to this? I mean did it ever occur to you how close we all are, at any point, to completely disintegrating, evaporating, dissolving, falling apart, breaking down and separating?

WE ARE ALL ONE OR NONE!

**DISTINGUISH YOURSELF
FROM THE FILTH OF THE TIME!**

SOCIETY OWES YOU NOTHING & EVERYTHING!

Take advantage of the free booking service by going to the Charles H. Scott Gallery front desk between the hours of 12:00 noon and 5:00 P.M., Monday to Friday, or between the hours of 10:00 A.M. and 5:00 P.M., Saturday and Sunday, to receive further instructions.



AB: The references you make in your work – to other artists, writers, and figures from popular culture – often provide you with an important framework for a project or an exhibition. Can you tell me a bit more about *Pale Fire Freedom Machine*, your 2005 project at The Power Plant in Toronto in which external referents were particularly visible.

GF: In this work I began by collecting abandoned wooden furniture, which was then brought in and stored at the gallery. We built a small factory in which the furniture was stripped of its paint and varnish, broken up and burned in a fireplace within the gallery. The resulting soot was used to produce ink, used in turn by gallery visitors to produce stamped text work or an abstract image using a screen and pieces of furniture. Finally, the posters could either be buried or burned in the fire. The paper was to have contained wild flower seeds or to be used as fire starters. The text for one of the posters was originally found taped to the inside drawer of a found desk and it outlined some rules of order. They were rules for how to keep an orderly work place, but it also said things like, "The road to Hell is paved with badly laid stones". In conceiving the piece I started with Vladimir Nabokov's book *Pale Fire* (1962), which became a conceptual template in the making of a project in which I was in a sense re-making or adapting a work by the artist Xavier Veilhan titled *Le Feu* (1996).

It is in part about the madness or peculiar logic of the translator's arbitrary choices

AB: What was the significance of Nabokov's novel and its relationship to Veilhan?

GF: The significance of *Pale Fire* as an organizing structure is that it concerns unreliable interpretation or translation; it is in part about the madness or peculiar logic of the translator's arbitrary choices. Veilhan made *Le Feu* in 1996.

It is an installation, as I understand it, in which visitors are invited to sit around a wood-burning fireplace in a gallery context. The fireplace Veilhan used was originally designed in 1968 by Dominique Imbert. Imbert was a Professor of Literature and earned his Doctorate of Sociology at the Sorbonne before becoming a metal sculptor.

He jokingly refers to this particular fireplace, which was the first one he had ever designed, as "revolutionary" because of its ability to rotate 360 degrees. I think though that he must also be referring, tongue and cheek, to the year of its fabrication, 1968. I found the fireplace during some of my initial research on Imbert's website which stated that it been the focus of several major exhibitions in contemporary galleries and museums. After recognizing Xavier's name in one of the photocredits, I soon realised that the photographs were actually documentation of Xavier Veilhan's installation. When I checked Veilhan's website there was no mention of Imbert. I thought it was a nice point of confusion. I had always wanted to do something with the novel *Pale Fire*, and I thought that perhaps this might be a good place to start. The title *Pale Fire* itself comes from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* and refers to the moon robbing the sun of its light.



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AB: This project was far more monumental than past projects, both in scale and in the tightly linked chain of references that thread through the project. Martin Kippenberger's *The Happy End of Franz Kafka's "Amerika"* (1994) seems to provide another artistic reference point. Was there a similar allegorical impulse embedded in *Pale Fire Freedom Machine*?

GF: I didn't produce it with a specific allegory in mind. I was interested in the idea of artistic appropriation and the idea of adaptation and translation. I also liked the idea of using an existing work and altering it to make a new work. I had always wanted to do a piece with furniture and this is partially based on something I remember reading in Marx's writing about chairs and tables dancing in the streets, about the seemingly magical quality of commodities because they contain the ghostly energies of the labour invested in their making. I am not sure if this is even true, if he wrote this, but it has always been in my mind that I attributed it to him.

AB: The furniture takes on almost anthropomorphic dimensions in this piece. Did your photographs of carefully grouped pieces of furniture come out of this work?

GF: Yes, I made portraits of some of the pieces of furniture before they were burned. It was a way for me to articulate how I was thinking about the furniture.

AB: Another large-scale project saw you making reference to the works of Charles Dickens in *The Blacking Factory* and *A Box With the Sound Of Its Own Making* at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver in 2002. While the enactment of your works can often be framed in the physical experience of the theatrical or cinematic, here you played more specifically with notions of artifice and its extension into the space of the gallery. Can you tell me a bit more about this project.

GF: This work consisted of fabricating a white semi-truck trailer, which was a scaled down version of the dimensions of the gallery space. I also hired a special effects company to blow out the windows of the smaller gallery space, which in effect was the shape of a box. It was titled, *A Box With The Sound Of Its Own Making*. This became a video work, which was projected inside that space. At the time I was very much interested in minimalism and specifically the works of Donald Judd and Robert Morris. I think this project acted in a mimetic way to help me work through what I understood to be the argument between their different working methodologies.

AB: Earlier you mentioned the influence of artists such as Cindy Sherman to your practice. You've also re-enacted seminal performances by female artists working at the height of the feminist "body art" movement of the late 1960s and '70s. Gender concerns are identifiable in much of your work. To what extent is the legacy of feminist art practice important to your work and to your own position in the sphere of art practice?

GF: I have always had an affinity with these works, and they became a point for me to understand how I wanted to position myself within my work. A lot of my instructors were women, and I think this has deeply influenced how I have conceived my work, and how I think it may function.

AB: Do you think that gender can still be used as an effective political strategy? Your early drawings are more overt in their use of gender as a subversive tactic, but your use of elements of a "craft aesthetic" could also be read as a challenge to the typically feminised characterisation of certain domestic crafts.

GF: I think an effective political strategy today is honesty. The problem with honesty is that it's tricky. One of my instructors at the San Francisco Art Institute, the late writer Kathy Acker, demonstrated this once to me in a writing assignment in which she asked us to write two texts – one we considered to be very honest and revealing and another that was a complete fabrication. Of course, when reading the works, the completely fabricated text ended up being, in a strange way, the most honest of the two.

AB: This space between a reality and a fabricated image of one has clearly remained a productive space for you to work in ...

GF: I think it is probably the space that we exist in most of the time.

GEOFFREY FARMER was born in 1967 in Vancouver, Canada where he lives and works. Recent solo exhibitions include at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal; The Power Plant, Toronto and Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver. Recent and upcoming group exhibitions include at Tate Modern, London; The Drawing Room, London and at the Art Gallery of Alberta, Canada.
ANDREW BONACINA is a writer and curator based in London.

