

FOREWORD

MARC MAYER

Of the many hundreds of times I have visited an art museum, I can recall only one instance when a work of art tricked me into believing that I was no longer looking at art, despite a context that made it unlikely to be anything else. Artists have been playing sneaky tricks on our eyes forever and, like most people, I'm familiar with the routine. But a transport trailer I confronted in the middle of a visit to the National Gallery of Canada convinced me that I had made a wrong turn and was now on the loading dock. Without thinking, I did an about-face and walked away. It eventually dawned on me, too much later, that one could probably not end up on the loading dock of a major museum from its public galleries. Come to think of it, that loading dock looked an awful lot *like* a public gallery. Feeling foolish, I doubled back, then got down on all fours to peer underneath the vehicle in question. Sure enough, it was a fake truck—therefore real art. I had been good and tricked. Spotting the wall label, I read the name “Geoffrey Farmer.” *Geoffrey Farmer?!?*

That wall label gave me a thrill. Unlike most people, I am delighted not to fully understand an artist's project, because it gives me a pleasant excuse for cogitation. Until that moment, I had not really cared to think about Geoffrey Farmer's work, having quickly sized it up to my satisfaction after seeing just one exhibition. His truck made me realize that I had been far too hasty. Nothing I knew about the artist, which was admittedly scant, could account for such an object, and when a work doesn't fit with what I already know, maybe I don't know enough.

It was while visiting The Power Plant in Toronto, however, and his unforgettable installation *Pale Fire*

Freedom Machine (2005) that I fully recognized that, not only is Farmer's project thoroughly inscrutable to me, his individual works are wonderfully rich. The more of them I see, and the more I learn about his unusual working method, the less likely I am ever to think that I have sized him up again. Like Paul-Émile Borduas, who cautioned his students against bringing pre-conceived ideas to the studio, Farmer is more an adventurer than an author. Both mercurial and pragmatic, his work often appears facetious and even trite, which only intensifies the surprise of its fundamental seriousness. It has repaid my contemplation more than once by giving me brisk glimpses of things I had not imagined seeing in art, such as the inevitable turbulence of history, the exasperating hegemony of narrative, and the polysemic nature of absolutely everything under the sun.

My interest in Farmer's art having become ardent, I was greatly reassured to learn that enthusiasm for it was already well established among my colleagues at the Musée. Consequently, we made short work of getting this exhibition into production. To my colleague Pierre Landry goes the laurel of wisdom for the justice he has done this artist in both the exhibition and, especially, in his insightful essay. We are also very pleased to have been able to include an essay by Scott Watson, Director of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery of the University of British Columbia, as he is a key authority on the Vancouver scene and an early enthusiast of Farmer's work. Jessica Morgan, Curator of Contemporary Art at London's Tate Modern, has contributed her perceptive analysis and her non-Canadian voice, which have considerably deepened the

relevance of this book. Besides being one of Canada's finest gallerists, Catriona Jeffries is also a generous collaborator and we thank her most warmly. For the quality of this publication, we have the financial support of the RBC Foundation to thank, particularly RBC Collection Curator Robin Anthony, whose passion

for Farmer's work equals our own. Gilles and Julia Ouellette are well-known as dear friends to new art, but their exceptional commitment to this audacious artist merits particular mention. We are grateful to them, as well as to all the lenders from across Canada who have helped make this mid-career survey possible.



Pale Fire Freedom Machine, 2005. Installation view at The Power Plant, Toronto