

MONIKA SZEWCZYK
CHANGES IN THE WORK OF GEOFFREY FARMER

GEOFFREY FARMER

21 OCTOBER – 18 NOVEMBER 2006

I watch the ripples change their size
But never leave the stream
Of warm impermanence

—David Bowie, *Ch-ch-changes*

Consider that Geoffrey Farmer's work proceeds from the U.F.O. — the *unidentified found object*, something 'out of this world'. In his latest exhibition at Catriona Jeffries' exhibition/work space, this object was the fuselage of an airliner found on a farm in the Fraser Valley and delivered to the gallery for the artist to work with; in this instance the found object was thus rather special, since as part of an aircraft that perhaps once flew it thus became an unidentified *flying* object to boot. Of course, an aircraft is an identifiable thing. So what I call the U.F.O. does not necessarily refer to something that we do not recognize or that is unidentified at the *beginning* of the journey — the *exhibition* always also being an expedition in time and in space for Farmer — but rather it designates the process of an object progressively turning stranger and stranger still. Perhaps it should be said then that Farmer's work proceeds towards the U.F.O. and the materials he starts with will no longer be identifiable as the space/time journey that is a Geoffrey Farmer exhibition runs its course.

Having said that Farmer's manipulation of everyday materials produces not just new objects, but entire new worlds, ones with unexpected relations to the one we may consider to be our own, it must be clarified that this "out of this world" character of art has a particular history. For many an observer of minimalism, Stanley Kubrick's opening sequence in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, where a tall black mute monolith stands amidst perplexed apes, is the ideal allegory of the strangeness of minimalist cubes and how they were encountered in galleries circa 1968. As if to elaborate on this strangeness — the sheer science fiction of this type of sculpture — John McCracken admits to making his rectilinear minimalist monads as a means to communicate with alien life forms. But if Kubrick's monolith and minimalist sculpture in general remain perplexing because they so visibly stand apart from this world, with their overly simplified geometry and their relentless lack of identifying marks or other signs of deliberate human artifice, Farmer's construction of worlds apart is quite distinct in that he prefers to work with things that seem all too familiar, all the while remaining astutely aware of the psycho-somatic affects of minimalism. Farmer has presented entities that are ubiquitously with us, such as a trailer used by film companies (something that seems to appear on every city block in his native Vancouver), a fireplace, and now an airliner, but he also chooses them because they quickly turn into crafts that may transport us to another dimension. To render these quotidian things alien, to produce a new world out of them, Farmer must imbue his materials with a rare narrative capacity or radically change the storyline that may already be attached to them.

In all Farmer's art, there exists an electric tension between things and our thoughts of them. His is not simply a study of the signification of objects, but, in true dialectical fashion, a protracted experiment with the way meaning is produced and confounded by the objectification or

materialization of thought. Consider that most often, his generative object is a book, an ancient form for objectifying thought and a world unto itself. This was the case with *Hunchback Kit* or *Pale Fire Freedom Machine* and with his most recent extrapolation from *The Last Two Million Years*, where the book quite literally becomes the material of a sculptural installation. In full awareness but in contrast to the dumb profundity of minimalist objects, Farmer sets, for himself and for his interlocutors in the gallery, the task of freshly encountering things not so much void of, but rather *too full of meaning*.

In his latest exhibition at Catriona Jeffries, the writing was on the wall: *For every airliner used in an artwork, there is a real one struggling to stay on the horizon....*

This phrase, which was present amidst other drawings and collages throughout Farmer's exhibition/expedition was something of the Rosetta Stone of his airliner project — the rare, readable, understandable text that seems to open up a lost or unattainable world. The line reinforces the presence of a parallel realm and attunes us to the fact that Farmer's work often involves the making of a *non-site* (a term and an operation that recalls Robert Smithson, one mighty ghost who haunts the entropic operations to which Farmer subjects objects). As non-sites, everyday objects are placed out of context and become foils for themselves — they lead double, if not triple, lives. With his airliner project, it quickly became apparent that the fuselage was many, even *too many*, things. As such, it was always being transported out of a particular contemporary context of overloaded signification, where aircraft are most often held hostage to their proliferating associations as props in terrorist plots or as casualties of war.

Recall, for instance, Huang Yong Ping's *Bat Project 2*, which casts the American EP-3 spy plane brought down in

March 2001 by a fatal collision with a Chinese fighter jet as a wreck overtaken by (taxidermied) bats and thus subject to post-historical (or is it anti-imperialist?) forces of nature. Here, the aircraft becomes a kind of relic of an imagined ending to the story of American hubris and Chinese resistance. However geopolitically subversive or whimsical in terms of its reanimation of the long tradition of *natura morte*, Huang Yong Ping presents a sculpture wherein the story behind the thing (and thus both the *story and the thing*) is solidified, recognizable, and historically grounded. Neither the object nor the narratives that animate it change or unfold physically before our eyes. Although this is the case with many of his other works it is interesting that Huang Yong Ping's use of an airplane fuselage is locked in a very particular narrative — testimony to a very contemporary signifying resonance, but also perhaps a block. *The Bat Project 2* thus reinforces the contemporary mythos of airplanes as things that crash, provoke conflict, and otherwise struggle to stay on the horizon. In the case of Geoffrey Farmer's airliner project at Catriona Jeffries, the object was never clearly delineated (I have been speaking of the work in the past tense rather than the conventional infinite present as it will never again appear as it did at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery space). The thing and the space around it unfolded and mutated over the course of 22 days and 22 nights. And finally, on the 23rd day, the fuselage disappeared with five days left for the exhibition, leaving behind a series of projected videos — strangely mute tales of animated objects, festive float spaces at times barely recognizable as the fuselage, haunted corners of economy seating, and other glimpses of things that seem to look back at us from a galaxy far far away.

It should be noted that the U.F.O. quality of Farmer's process-based sculptural practice is not so strange to be without context. There is recourse here to numerous venerable examples of "process work" from Bruce

Naumann's epic *Mapping the Studio II* (Fat Chance John Cage) (2002)¹ through Yvonne Rainer's *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (1970) to Joseph Beuys' ritualized *I like America and America likes me* (1974), wherein the artist stayed locked up over a period of several days inside René Block Gallery in New York, with a coyote, a felt blanket, a daily delivered *New York Times* and a shepherd's staff.² Seen in this company, Farmer's process during the four weeks of the exhibition is in part a practical elaboration of a specific historical trajectory of art making. Indeed, it could be said that Farmer's fuselage is like Beuys' coyote in that it shares the animal's animate and highly unpredictable quality. And yet, in contrast to the function of Beuys' coyote which we encounter under its great symbolic burden as America or perhaps more precisely as the Wild West, the fuselage and its accoutrements are constantly misidentified, reconsidered, physically transformed and rendered progressively blank, ready to be projected with fresh meanings. The artist stayed with his problematic guest and often wrestled with its meaning. Of course the fuselage is no independently active being. However, through the videos produced by Farmer, which animate such things as a broom, a pillow, and a pair of light bulbs, inanimate things do acquire a kind of warmth or a pulse.

When at a certain point the fuselage became a dead ringer for the festival float composed of found furniture and streamers erected at Catriona Jeffries Gallery during Farmer's exhibition *Every surface in some way decorated, altered, or changed forever (except the float)* (2004), I began to understand that this earlier project was not yet finished, that the fuselage was an avatar of the float. Throughout his latest occupation of Catriona Jeffries' space, object-motifs such as streamers and wigs (which refer to an earlier exhibition/expedition entitled *Catriona-Jeffries-Catriona*) served as portals to previous works, extending the time/space of this new exhibition,

but also asserting that Farmer's particular encounter with process-based art does not want to do away with the object, to dematerialize it. On the contrary, things are central.

They transport thoughts. In this case I sense a specificity to the artist's use of a fuselage — as a part of an airplane, it is a craft that may transport us to yet another early installation realized for the group exhibition 6: *New Vancouver Modern* held at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery in 1998, where Farmer occupied the space of one of Vancouver's most modern exhibition spaces, videographically exploring/exploiting its design details in order to cast it as a futuristic spacecraft. To recall this work is to realize that in most subsequent instances the gallery as much as the things in it are continually transformed into U.F.O.'s.

Farmer's exhibitions flow into each other forming a kind of stream of impermanence. The medium of video and his performances with objects are crucial to marking this temporal flow. Everywhere there is deliberate play with the tension between temporal media and the all too solid material world. Farmer seems to relish in showing that things are solid by watching them break; this is perhaps best evidenced by one characteristically deadpan video sequence where two light bulbs videotaped to seem as if they were eyes looking back at us are summarily crushed with a piece of 2x4 fastened to Farmer's shoe.³

The moment that a way of looking at things is solidified, it has to melt. And just when we think the fuselage is at the centre of the exhibition, it disappears. Yet, if "all that is solid melts into air" in Farmer's work, this is not to reinforce a commitment to a 1970s notion of the dematerialization of the art object. Rather, this is a contradictory provocation to invest *more* in things. Farmer enacts this investment like a zen master. He gives the light bulbs an empathic gaze so as to strengthen our identification with them as breathing, seeing beings. And if we thought that we are beyond all

this, we may think otherwise when we see them brutally crushed. That these experiments involve specific recurring constellations of everyday objects — often domestic, janitorial, or otherwise non-precious — seems to give them *more* of a life. This is not life as we know it. At stake in Farmer's practice is the articulation of this radically different relation to things that may also imply a radically different human life. Not much more can be said about this, from my perspective, because I sense that Farmer himself has not defined this difference. However, it is clear that for him the creation of this space of difference in the here and now remains the great potential of the gallery and of art. Cinema and books are also apt in opening up this otherworldly view and they are always incorporated, but Farmer recognizes that a fresh physical encounter with the most familiar everyday things has the potential to transport us the furthest afield.

NOTES

1. This was a kind of "all action edit" presented at Sperone Westwater Gallery in New York in the Summer of 2002, concurrently with the hours upon hours of mostly non-eventful, even zen (to pick up on the Cage associations) of *Mapping the Studio I* (*Fat Chance John Cage*) presented at the Dia Art Centre warehouse in Chelsea. The "all action edit" presents a more suitable comparison for the videos made and presented by Farmer in the course of his project with the fuselage, since in these videos, the no-things (castaway or backroom objects such as a broom or light bulbs) gain an absurd narrative function.

2. Beuys' work has an accidental "airliner" connection to Farmer's fuselage as its real beginning is often cited to be in John F. Kennedy Airport, where the artist was wrapped in a felt blanket upon arrival from Düsseldorf, and transported to the gallery. Of course, Beuys' entire career could be related in that its genesis was always traced by the artist himself to his famed survival of the crash of his WWII Stuka Divebomber in 1944 in the Crimea.

3. His more dramatic burning of all the furniture assembled for his exhibition *Pale Fire* at the Power Plant in Toronto is another solid example of his experiments with the measure and quality of our investment in things through the enacting of their impermanence.