The Mnemosyne Atlas of Geoffrey Farmer

PETER CULLEY

"It is in those formal creations of periods in which a defunct cultural idea exists only as its own formal cadaver, or disintegrates into its elements, that art makes its anatomical and analytical studies."

—GOTTFRIED SEMPER

"Forms of intellectual and spiritual culture sometimes exercise their subtlest and most artful charm when life is already passing from them."

—WALTER PATER

Like a lot of people on Vancouver Island, I live a certain distance down one of those poorly-marked little roads that abruptly dogleg off the main highway. Even connected as they are, the toxically busy highway and quasi-deserted side road still occupy entirely separate temporal spaces. Their point of contact is a dangerous place, especially for pedestrians, whose interests are rarely incorporated into highway design, at least out here. To be without a car in such places, even temporarily, is to consign oneself to a kind of pre-municipal oblivion. You take your chances, in other words. So about a year ago I was not surprised to see erected at my intersection an impromptu memorial to a young man who had been run over trying to cross the highway there. Having nervously done so myself at that point a few times, I was also aware that the recent addition of a concrete barrier down the center strip—of dimensions apparently designed to discourage foot crossings as much as left turns—had made navigation of the corner an even chancier proposition, especially at night, when the man was killed. At first (perhaps creating distance from the remembered trauma of my own close calls, but more likely reinforcing the unwritten codes of my social caste) I was inclined to reflexively sneer, both at the kitschy monument and the haplessness of the poor soul whose (doubtless impaired) instincts could not remove him from the car's path. You take your chances.

After a year though, oblivious to my heartless repartee, the monument is still there, is even kept up, if intermittently. The portrait photograph of the young man, invariably an inkjet printout which washes out and fades immediately, has been replaced three or four times; the flowers (both real and artificial) more often. Someone has clearly gone to a lot of trouble to memorialise their fallen companion, on a continu-

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ous and public basis, not least so by repeatedly exposing themselves to the same traffic that claimed him. If the rise of such a dramatic and personalised style of public mourning comes from a number of sources, it can perhaps be conveniently associated with the aftermath of the death of Lady Diana. Explaining the persistence and growth is more difficult.

The rotting, rat-infested heaps of flowers, trinkets and sentimental verse bulldozed from the gates of Buckingham Palace in 1997 were clearly some kind of watershed, signaling a shift in the material and social relations governing devotionalism in our culture. This shift can be most obviously seen in the vast amounts of time television now devotes to the literal celebration of death, from the creepily "sincere" talk show *Crossing Over* to the glazed condescension of the real-time coverage of the funerals of the Canadian soldiers recently killed in Afghanistan, not to mention the numerous fictional autopsies that have come—most recently in series' such as "C.S.I." and "Da Vinci's Inquest"—to represent the medium's bedrock truth value. The latter, indeed, in its concentration on Vancouver's neglected and exploited Downtown Eastside, opens up the entire city's body politic for unflattering inspection. But even beyond death as the immediate subject, this forensic turn permeates our culture, as every object doubles as ambiguous evidence, ripe with unknowable meaning, vaguely corporeal yet somehow utterly superfluous. The importance of the monument at my intersection is not that its creators mourned their friend, but that they did so publicly and profligately, investing not only in the abstraction of his memory but in consecrating with objects the place where he died: not simply to mourn, but to be seen to mourn, to express loss in terms of plenitude, site and duration.

If it is important to differentiate between the nominal criticality of such constructions as Geoffrey Farmer's and the excesses of the culture in which they are embedded, it is their correspondences that interest me here. For underlying this desperate heaping up of objects and effects, either on the side of the Island Highway or in front of Buckingham Palace, is the same loss of faith in the stability of signification—however ordered—that animates Farmer's practice. For if in its obsessively commemorative, taxonomic drift, "mainstream" culture has come to resemble its

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Acme Prop House, Burnaby, BC

avant-garde pendant, if both have become barely distinguishable subsets of the same trans-global entertainment imperium, then the role of artist as master of objects, knowing ironist or crusading anatomist becomes increasingly unsupportable, even ridiculous.

Although Farmer's work can hardly be described as "populist" (despite a ravenous immersion in the disjecta of vernacular culture), it nonetheless also resists the comforts of an institutionalised "outsider" critique. It attempts instead a conflicted but ultimately democratic representativeness. Farmer seems more interested in internalising and embodying quite typical cultural symptoms—often literally working them through—than in fetishising a "unique" point of view. While pivoting uncomfortably between solidarity with and dismay at the often distressing conjunctions that this conceptual aporia gives rise to, he remains more interested in what typifies cultural exchange *generally*, in teasing suppressed traces of commonality from an era of relentless atomisation.

Thus it is a mistake, I think, to read the fragile child-like characters at the center of much of his work—ET, the Hunchback and, very indirectly, *The Blacking Factory*'s Dickensian child—as stand-ins for any particular wounded subjectivity, least of *all* his own. Rather Farmer would have them represent the unacknowledged *general* subjectivity, one in which we all half-secretly perceive ourselves as hurt, unloved and desperate for connection. The endemic institutional and social denial of such feelings in Farmer's chosen milieu—the Olympian detachment that accompanies the gallery system's Apollonian white walls—is the blank ground against which Farmer's dramas of excess and suppression can play themselves out.

But when, in the recent *Catriona Jefferies Catriona*, Farmer literally occupied the site of his own exhibition as if it were both anchorite cell and stage, it was less a theatricalised assertion of spatial dominance than an attempt to reclaim for the space of art a literal human trace. The gallery existed not as a neutral area to be discretely half-filled with carefully delineated objects of interest, but as a space whose organising and rationalising force must be physically resisted, by accumulation and occupation. Likewise the formal

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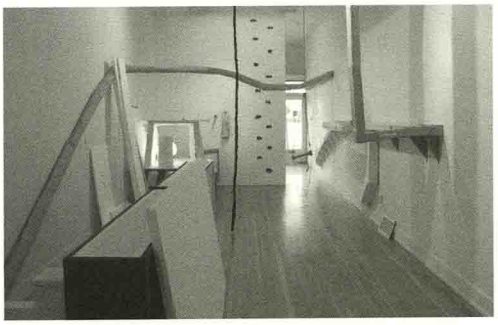
versatility Farmer displays—his works contain drawings, research documentation, videos, found objects, etc.—argues not to a desire for mastery but to a sense of restless insufficiency, an impatience with any particular means of expression *as such*. Aggregation works not towards authority and control so much as against absence, emptiness and estrangement.

Toward the end of his life, the pioneering critic Aby Warburg, whose career had been devoted to the exploration of a highly complex, Nietzschean conception of the cross-cultural correspondences of symbolic forms, could no longer express the complexity of his ideas in linear, written form. Instead he would arrange, on large sheets of black paper, images ranging from canonical artworks to penny postcards to illustrations torn from medical books. Eschewing the synthesising tendency of collage, the illustrations could float in a field of turbulent relations, engendering connections without fixing them. While Farmer's constructions are scarcely as richly allusive—or explicitly pedagogical—as Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, they share impatience with the compromises of arbitrarily determined coherence: they are both suspicious of any but the most contingent and qualified understanding.



The mechanically routinised process by which a viewer enters a gallery, gazes at an object or event until comprehension arrives like the fortune cookie at the end of a Chinese buffet, is anathema to Farmer as false consciousness and bad faith. The gallery becomes a place, not of connection and catharsis, but of repression, a machine for the maintenance of a corrupt *status quo*. It is as if in inhabiting the gallery, in guarding, even concealing the objects he has gathered and created, Farmer can forestall the transformation of private iconography into banal cocktail fodder or muzak for the distraction of the chronically inattentive. Farmer's own conflicted attraction to the gallery system's considerable benefits is not avoided; he is not a scold, merely prepared to inhabit contradiction.

In this calculation, the role of curator, as guide and shaper, as envoy between artist's vision and spectator's desire, is both necessary and suspect. As professional—and increasingly powerful—progenitors of "understanding" curators are perforce

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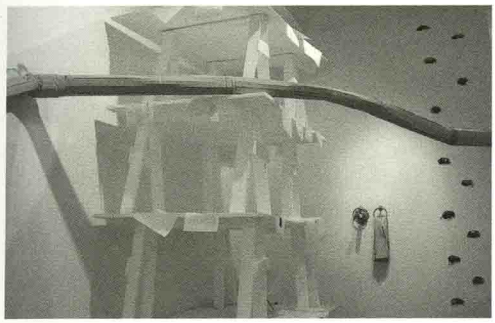

Installation views, *Catriona Jeffries Catriona,* 2001

mandated to simplify and rationalize highly complex phenomena, sometimes in the service of an agenda at odds with the artist's intentions. Often, indeed, curators can create a new body of work merely by recombining old works into new curatorial narratives or reclassifying as art hitherto unregarded phenomena. Again, the control the artist has over such developments is often slight. In an era defined by a crisis of signification, the dissemination of ultimate meaning has become, to the relief of many, an institutional responsibility. Most artists of any ambition quickly adapt to this, and many internalise this loss of control, incorporating curatorial concerns into their work as if in anticipation. But if, required by both ambition and compulsion to collaborate with the gallery system, Farmer nonetheless refuses to enthusiastically accommodate its concerns—testing its limits like a hungry orphan in a workhouse—his critique does not carry a personal exemption.

Catriona Jeffries Catriona's doubling of gallery function proceeded from its name, enacting the duplication of owner and site. Much as a monarch has two bodies, the corporeal wearer of the crown and that crown's metaphoric embodiment, "Catriona Jeffries" names both woman and gallery. By moving into the gallery, taking on the role of owner and sub-curator of the objects he had arranged and created within, Farmer usurped both functions. Though *The Blacking Factory*'s fraught negotiation of gallery space is more oblique than *Catriona Jeffries Catriona*, it is also tinged with an indignation one might almost term political. Its origins—though absorbed entirely into the work as you read this—are in the life and work of Charles Dickens.

Like Steven Spielberg, Charles Dickens has never really been in fashion among intellectuals. Both men harnessed deep-seated neuroses to create art that was not only popular, but resonated with the deepest yearnings of their respective cultures in ways that a Flaubert or Fassbinder could only envy. Both could, at their best, unselfconsciously flood their narratives with either infantile terror or liberating sentiment, secure in the intimacy and trust of their audiences, literally at one with them. The modernist estrangement Flaubert had from his audience has become, 150 years later, as ossified as the Third Republic, a permanent and subsidised habit, a tic.

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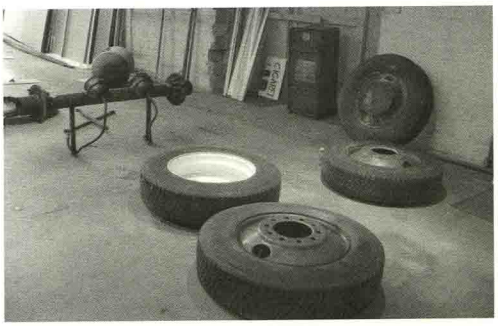
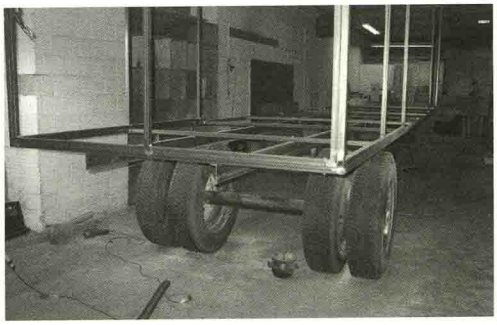
If Farmer's invocation of Dickens in *The Blacking Factory* is partly out of a nostalgia for an idealised pre-modern unity of artist, audience and subject, it is also an assertion of the theatricality and emotional excess that Dickens used as a tool of social and psychological enquiry.

When Charles Dickens was ten years old his father was imprisoned for debt, and the child was sent to work in a "blacking" or boot polish factory, filling and sealing the bottles, tying up their stoppers with twine and gluing on the labels. Reduced at a stroke from an apparent middle class gentility to the most menial labour, this trauma is the central event of Dickens' life. But it is a trauma whose effects were divided: on the one hand it indelibly instilled in Dickens the passionate concern for the unfortunate that was to distinguish his career, on the other it was a continued source of profound embarrassment and unease. The boys he worked with in the factory were dirty and ungenteel, the way they mocked his educated airs and physical frailty intensified his profound sense of having fallen, of having been *brought low* by circumstances. His compassion for the suffering poor was thus inextricably bound up with distaste and fear. Though he returns to the site in his fiction many times, it is not something he ever talks about directly; the biographical facts were not generally known until long after his death. Dickens' blacking shop is a site in which social dislocation and embarrassment act as pivotal but unacknowledged sources of artistic power.

Farmer's *Blacking Factory* is likewise a site in which motifs of labour, dislocation and embarrassment are both confronted and concealed. Farmer's unease at functioning within a milieu that both degrades and rewards him is the work's most powerfully transmitted quality, and even the most committed viewer will not derive from it either assurance or closure. Indeed the lingering feeling of having been inattentive, of having accidentally missed or forgotten something important—of confronting work in which absence counts for as much as presence—haunts the viewer, underscoring the fragility and tentativeness of the gallery experience. Farmer's awkwardness and wavering faith fasten themselves onto the viewer more firmly than specificities of detail; and it is less the frayed pretensions of the gallery system that are





Production shots, *Trailer*, 2002

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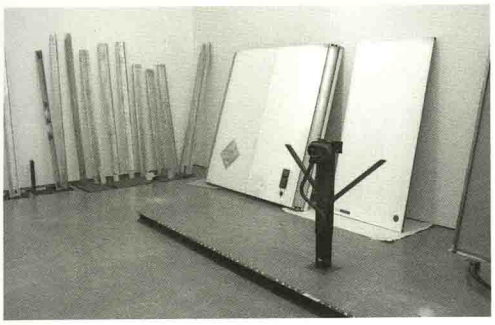

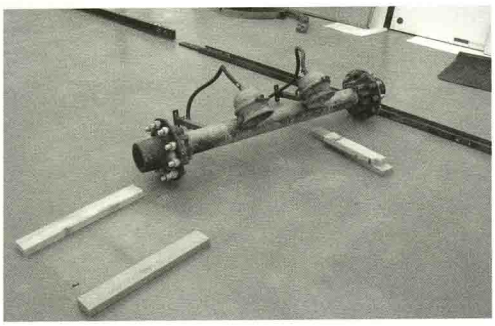

Installation shots, *Trailer*, Contemporary Art Gallery, 2002

brought into question than the habits of memory and expectation underlying and supporting them.

Thus, after a period of proceeding largely on faith, my long delayed encounter with the completed work was an inevitably theological one. The somber delicacy of testing "the evidence of things not seen" against actual experience was exacerbated in the case of *The Blacking Factory* by the radical shifts that had occurred during the work's development. What I had taken for plenitude and excess in the planning had been reduced by the show's opening to less than a handful of elements. Baroque extravagance had apparently given way to Manichean simplicity, and funereal purgation to Freudian suppression. The open procedures and visible labour that had been close to the center of Farmer's practice now had to be largely inferred. Fabrication of both trailer and film loop had clearly been outsourced, a clear distancing from the handcrafted aesthetic of earlier work. And it was also possible to infer from the form of the work's final, apparently reduced phase an icily reluctant capitulation to prevailing modes of curatorial convenience. If the work retained a conceptual complexity, it was now nonetheless *easy to describe*. That the almost brutal, exasperated, *Zabriskie's Point* endgame of *The Blacking Factory* should have partly taken the form of a projected video loop could have, for example, been at least partly an occasional sculptor's irritated attempt to prepare the death mask for a form that has come to dominate contemporary gallery practice, arguably at the expense of more tentative forms (painting, for one). And it has done so less out of any intrinsically interesting formal dialectic than an ability to dominate, with minimal fuss and expense, the cavernous spaces of such locations as the Contemporary Art Gallery.

The Blacking Factory's explosion could be seen as a projected loop in *reductio ad absurdum*, a deadpan reply to both the gallery's need for a largeish but discrete and repeatable event and the punter's desire for an unmissable metaphor, an interpretive black hole. The mild shock of experiencing *The Blacking Factory*'s explosion for the first time quickly gave way to an equally familiar feeling: the art massage, the warm and fuzzy opposite of defamilarisation. This rapid rationalisation, the explosion's domestication as *mere art*—even in a historical environment theoretically

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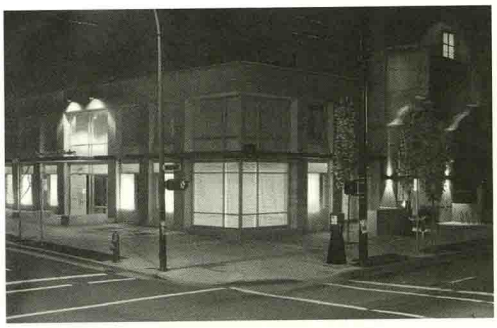
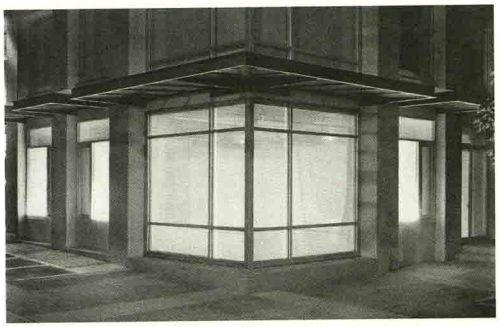
more sensitive to such things—deflected its vague hostility without necessarily obviating it. Nothing personal, it seemed to say, a warning had been given in good faith. But as the sequence repeated, the periods between the establishing wide-shots of the Contemporary Art Gallery's exterior began to grow shorter and the explosion itself seemed to expand and shudder. The screen filled for long moments with the sort of particulate visual matter produced by rubbing one's eyes after walking out of the dark into a bright place. And if I leapt at those moments of evanescently shimmering display as symbolic traces of *The Blacking Factory*'s lost plenitude, it was out of the realisation that the real movement of any loop is towards stasis; every element contained within remains there, real dispersal is impossible. The explosion, which was of course not an explosion at all, paradoxically emphasized that. Nothing could be added, but nothing could be taken away either. In *The Blacking Factory*'s spatial assertion the index of objects was abstracted but not abandoned. Sealed within a hermetic oscillation of cultural energy, they were both contained and dispersed.





The reproduction of the film set trailer in the opposite gallery was more clearly a place in which signifying detail was to be interred, a reliquary for the community of unclassifiable data and unrealised memorials. So much so that the immaculate veneer of its artifice barely registered. Honestly and immediately inert in a way that the film loop makes you discover, it was curiously weightless for such a vast object, its iconic minimalism lightly worn. It's referencing of Vancouver's film industry, like the "cinematic" loop across the way, was less I think about the industry itself than the strange trauma that the triumph of Hollywood driven neo-colonialism has enacted upon the city's intellectual community. The city now exists under a regime of such totalised self-absorption that not only are the capacities of the liberal mind to process and critique it tested, but the very "community values" that might form the basis of a critique seem fragile when they can be discerned at all. The provincial government's systematic dismantling of the social consensus, for example, has to a large degree taken place behind the bright surface of the city's self-regard. To the extent that Vancouver's supposedly triumphant art community registers in this equation it is as sideshow and exploitable

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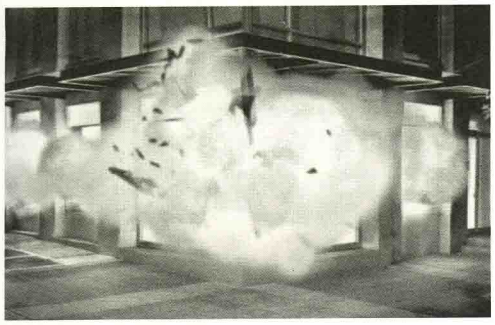
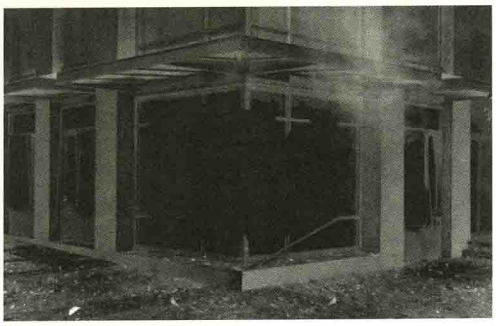
resource. Marginality is countered with smugness, irrelevancy with mannerism.

To interrogate those few unifying fictions left us is a thankless but necessary part of a rigorous re-assessment, and if *The Blacking Factory* took up the task with some reluctance it was that the bonds of fealty and affection that bind Farmer to the gallery system are at least as strong as his appetite for its destruction. And if in so obliquely countering his milieu's deep distrust of mourning and emotional excess Farmer risked reproducing its evasions and exclusions, his obstinate belief in the indestructibility of content and memory worked against such accommodations without entirely loosening their seductive grip. *The Blacking Factory* not only raised more questions than it could begin to answer, it also tried to obviate the very basis of such an enquiry. This embedded resistance can pall when disconnected from wit, but Farmer's sublimely irritating construction was animated with a sly humour that suspended disbelief even as it encouraged skepticism. In a time of increasing consensual repression, such fundamental untrustworthiness and instability generate their own value.





Geoffrey Farmer, *Box With the Sound of Its Own Making*, 2002
Stills from DVD (plus next two pages)

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