

# WHERE'S GEOFFREY?

PIERRE LANDRY

My first meeting with Geoffrey Farmer in preparation for his exhibition at the Musée d'art contemporain took place in Montréal at the beginning of March 2007. We could have met in Vancouver, where the artist lives, but since the form and meaning of his works often develop as a function of where they are shown, it seemed logical that he should come to Montréal.

The meeting naturally involved an exchange of information. At once precise and expansive, Farmer gave me a thorough account of his art practice. He spoke first of his years as a student during the early 1990s, at the San Francisco Art Institute and at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design in Vancouver. Then he talked enthusiastically about several artists whose works have had an impact on him (including the writer Kathy Acker, who was one of his teachers), evidently making no attempt to minimize the various influences and links. He subsequently responded to a number of questions, describing the main stages in the conception and execution of a work, and the different contexts in which it might be shown.

Then there was a slight shift and we began discussing different aspects of the exhibition's organization. I mentioned the publication that would accompany it—part of an existing series defined by established parameters. I showed him the galleries in which his exhibition was to be held. He appeared to like the space. Then I mentioned the time we planned to allot to the installation of the works. Again, he seemed content enough.

This first encounter left me perplexed. Clearly, Geoffrey Farmer is deeply committed to his art, and he talks about it readily, with a remarkable concern for

accuracy. Yet I sensed that he remains somehow in the background, in the position of an observer, and that this reflects not so much a detachment from the world around him as a curiosity about it—even an extreme sensitivity to it.

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Employing the techniques of conceptual and installation art, Geoffrey Farmer exploits the disciplines and mediums of sculpture, video, performance and the found object. At once fragile and protean, discreet and omnipresent, his works generally convey a sense of his evident pleasure in simple but carefully thought-out—even strategic—manipulation. While his creations are sometimes difficult to define, especially since their form can actually alter over the course of an exhibition, they are also eminently accessible. They operate on the level of everyday experience, simultaneously rational and chaotic, undeniably concrete yet shaped by the imagination. In a voice that combines poetry and social commentary, they conjure and reactivate a variety of narratives and anecdotes drawn from history, popular culture, art history and the social environment. Farmer focuses particular attention on certain features of these diverse sources, notably the concept of work. Several of his pieces seem to gravitate around this notion, invoking and exploring it in its different guises: as process, as transformation, as performance ...

In the summer of 2002, Geoffrey Farmer held an exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver called *The Blacking Factory*—an allusion to the universe of Charles Dickens. The show consisted of three works that at first glance bore little relation to the

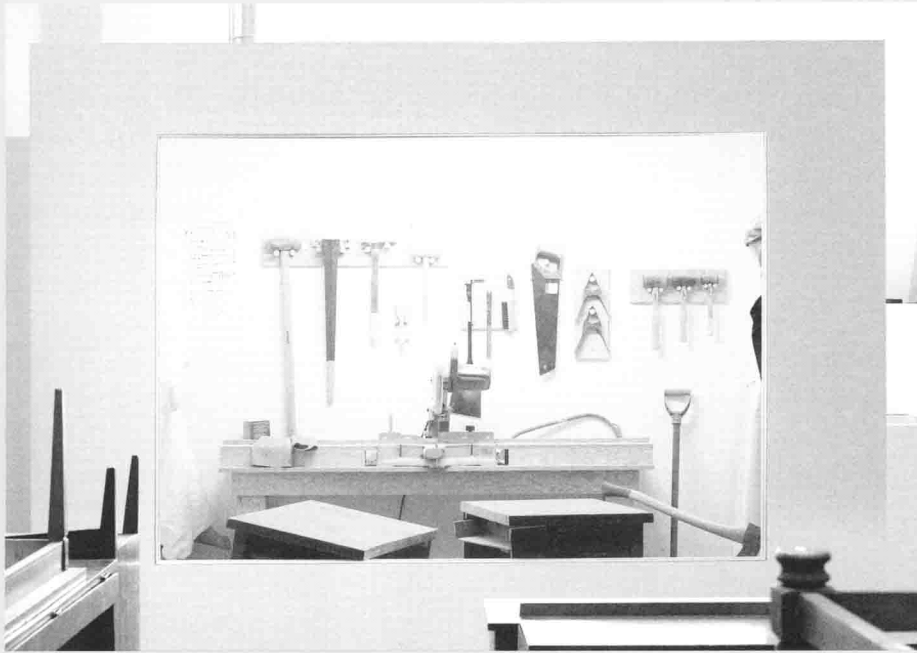
English author. The “blacking factory” of the title was a reference to the period of Dickens’s childhood when he was sent to work in a boot-blacking factory to help support his family. The harshness of his experience there had a major impact on his subsequent literary output. Farmer’s three pieces, on the other hand, were linked to the film industry. One of them, *Trailer* (2002), resembles the kind of truck trailer seen often at on-location film sets of the mainstream movies shot so frequently in Vancouver. The work’s evocation of the film industry’s overpowering presence in the region (its vast bulk more or less fills the space) is combined with a critique of the artificiality of Hollywood that is embodied in the trailer itself, which is actually a life-size *trompe-l’œil* reconstruction made principally out of steel and fibreboard.<sup>1</sup> But the exhibition title, *The Blacking Factory*, hints at a number of other readings. It reminds the spectator that Hollywood, like the worlds described in many of Dickens’s novels, is first and foremost a work environment, and that its power as a generator of fiction—and thus its affective dimension—depends to a great extent on a social reality that is itself highly concrete.<sup>2</sup>

This bringing together of apparently distinct worlds—and the resulting opening onto a wider reality—provides the basis for several of Farmer’s works, including the group of photographs united under the title *Pale Fire Freedom Machine*. This was also the title of an installation presented at The Power Plant in Toronto, in the fall of 2005. The gallery where this piece was shown was transformed into what looked like a small factory filled with a huge array of second-hand wooden furniture, grouped around a minimalist fireplace created in 1968 by the French designer Dominique Imbert. As the exhibition progressed, the furniture was burned piece by piece in the fireplace. The soot resulting from the fire was turned into ink, which was used to produce (within the exhibition space) small posters that served to kindle the next day’s fire. Through this *mise en scène*, in which fire played a central role, Farmer compared and contrasted the materiality and the ephemerality of things, the exhibition as duration and the exhibition as product, the utopianism of a design from the 1960s and ordinary

everyday life (as well as being second-hand, the furniture was mass-produced).

The photographs made in conjunction with this installation portray furniture arranged in compositions that are simultaneously abstract and figurative, commonplace and strangely poetic. The titles (*Cliff Face*, for example, or *Propeller*) point to specific “images” that the compositions conjure up, which set the functional nature of the pieces of furniture off against the apparent randomness of their arrangement. The photographs seem to be depicting a process that transforms the juxtapositions of furniture into a cliff face, a propeller or some other more or less identifiable form.

The notions of process and transformation are also central to the installation *Entrepreneur Alone Returning Back to Sculptural Form* (2002). This work, originally presented in an empty office in a Toronto financial institution (and shown in an adapted version at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal), consists of a multitude of semi-abstract elements made of cheap materials and distributed throughout the space. In both its title and its form the work evokes the apparently contradictory worlds of artistic practice and office work, which it brings together by means of a hypothetical transformational process. The emphasis here is on becoming—the becoming of the entrepreneur of the title, who seems to be reverting to an anterior state, or, as Deleuze and Guattari have put it, whose identity has been fractured into a mass of particles that are in a perpetual state of becoming: “Starting from the forms one has, the subject one is, the organs one has, or the functions one fulfills, becoming is to extract particles between which one establishes the relations of movement and rest, speed and slowness that are *closest* to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes. This is the sense in which becoming is the process of desire.”<sup>3</sup> *Entrepreneur Alone...* is therefore less the representation of a situation on the point of happening than a movement. It embodies a temporality that is both multiple and condensed, that fuses past, present and future into an enlarged reality, vast and ever changing (as witness the present continuous verb tense of the title), whose perpetual movement is in fact that of a continually renewed desire.



## THE RULES OF THE ORDER

- 1) DISORDER IS TREACHERY.
- 2) THE ROAD TO HELL IS PAVED WITH BADLY LAID STONES.
- 3) A TIDY WORKER IS A HAPPY WORKER.
- 4) ORDERLINESS IS NEXT TO GODLINESS.
- 5) A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING & EVERYTHING IN IT'S PLACE.
- 6) ORDER DEMANDS CONSTANT VIGILANCE.
- 7) DON'T LET DOWN YOUR TEAM, TIDY UP.
- 8) OUR ONLY ASSET IS A TIDY WORKPLACE.

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

With *The Last Two Million Years*, an installation first presented in June 2007 at The Drawing Room in London and exhibited in Montreal in a new form, Farmer looks at one of the most amazing stories of all time: the history of humanity. Based on a book of the same title published by Reader's Digest during the 1970s, the work consists of a lengthy sequence of images taken from the book and displayed throughout the exhibition space on a series of connected foamcore plinths. Ignoring the chronology of the narrative, Farmer rearranges human history in a series of free associations that haphazardly mixes periods, cultures and regions. The result is monumental and fragile, ordered and chaotic, serious and humorous—and extraordinarily poetic. To the vast whole (the sum of human development over the past two million years) that the original exercise in scientific vulgarization attempted to encapsulate and organize, Farmer has added volume and amplitude, space and light. The images of *The Last Two Million Years*, which served initially as the illustrations for the book (some made especially, some reproductions of artworks, some photographs of objects fabricated by humans), regain some of their original complexity and visual richness in the new associations imposed upon them by Farmer. The course of history is interrupted, fragmented and multiplied in a presentation that conjures something of the classical museum display but lacks its didactic, asepticizing character.

A similar interplay of diverse spaces and temporalities runs through *Notes for Strangers* (1990), which consists of a series of short descriptive notes—that can be read as poems—written by Farmer about strangers encountered by chance on the bus. Most of the “poems” were given to their subjects when the artist left the bus. *Notes for Strangers* are the ones he was unable to deliver because the people they were intended for got off before he did. It strikes us at first as a “discreet” work, in both its form and its content, but its spatial and temporal scope is actually vast. Focused essentially on the ideas of loss and absence, it opens onto an indeterminate, virtually infinite space that is constantly being reshaped by the subsequent fate of the poems Farmer was able to deliver to those concerned—poems that are

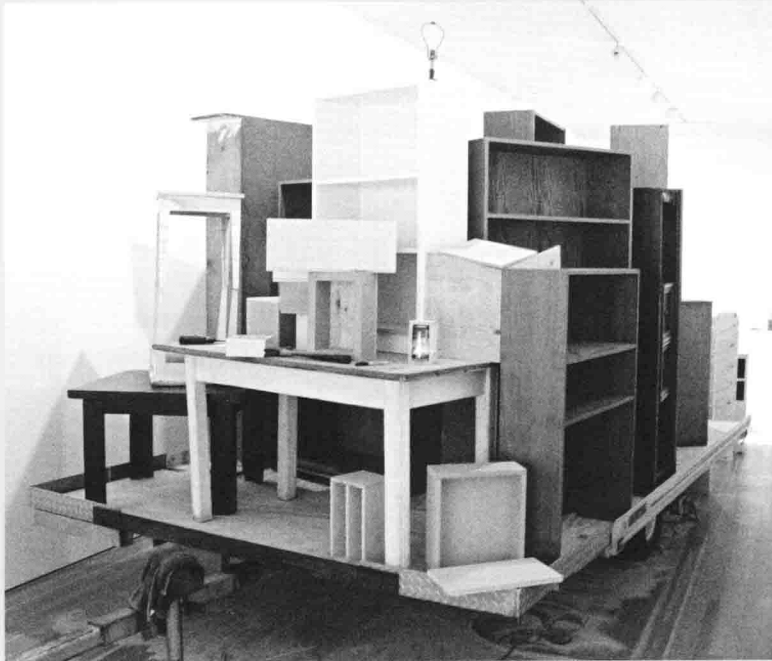
in a sense also part of the work, but about which we know nothing.

The first piece in the exhibition, *The Idea and the Absence of the Idea (Not the Work, the Worker)* (2008), refers to a phrase written by Gordon Matta-Clark in one of his notebooks. Like *Notes for Strangers*, the work is defined principally by the process that gave rise to it. A small area of the gallery's wooden floor has been cut out and reduced to pulp; this pulp was then used to make a piece of paper, which is displayed on the wall opposite the hole created by the removal of the wood; the artist has written the quote from Matta-Clark on the piece of paper: “Not the work, the worker.”

The work thus has the effect of reminding the visitor, at the very start of the show, that all creation is linked to a creator, who is also a worker. From this key position it sets the tone of the whole exhibition, which as a consequence takes on the allure of a huge construction whose spatio-temporal parameters (a particular work, which takes a particular form here and now, is placed in relation with other works, the whole forming an arrangement of which it is possible to imagine other versions) are the product of the work of an artist who is himself connected to other artists, other workers.

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In a recent interview, responding to a question concerning his use of structures resembling parade floats, Farmer explained that he was “curious to see how a float would look if the theme was ‘Death of the Author’”<sup>4</sup>—an implicit reference (albeit humorous) to Roland Barthes's 1968 essay of the same title, which explores the gradual “distancing” of author from text that has been occurring since the end of the nineteenth century. Barthes states that “the author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the ‘human person.’”<sup>5</sup> Mallarmé, Proust and Brecht, but also surrealism and even linguistics have all helped to undermine this prestige by questioning the position of anteriority traditionally



Every surface in some way decorated, altered, or changed forever (except the float), 2004. Installation views at Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

assigned to the author in relation to the work. The modern author, Barthes says, “is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now.”<sup>6</sup>

Foucault defends a similar position in his article “What is an Author?,” first presented in February 1969 in the form of a lecture.<sup>7</sup> Like Barthes the previous year, Foucault suggests taking a different viewpoint in relation to the work. “It is a matter,” he writes, “of depriving the subject... of its role as originator, and of analyzing the subject as a variable and complex function of discourse.”<sup>8</sup> Foucault replaces the author as the original and unique creative source of a work with the author defined by a function (what he calls the “author function”)—in other words, by a process through which an object or a discourse, viewed in a particular context, is assigned a certain status.

As we have seen, Farmer’s works are shaped principally by the process that gives rise to them and that continues to operate, either actually<sup>9</sup> or virtually.<sup>10</sup> This is the source of our impression of a practice in a perpetual state of becoming, with undefined, even

immeasurable boundaries. That the artist’s goal is to include and embrace everything seems to be made clear by some of his titles—like *Every surface in some way decorated, altered, or changed forever (except the float)*, which accompanied an evolving installation presented in 2004 at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery. In aiming at this goal, Farmer is countermanding one of the principal functions of an author’s name, which is to exclude and circumscribe in order to permit the establishment of a corpus. For the emphasis in Farmer’s practice on process does not result in a turning-in of the work (*œuvre*) upon itself. On the contrary, this all-important process, as a form of work (*travail*), is what enables the work (*œuvre*) to take its place in the world, sharing with that world the same omnipresence of work (*travail*) and even certain types of work (*travail*), since Farmer’s works (*œuvres*) are generally the result of simple, easily performable operations whose presence in the realm of artistic techniques is largely a matter of context.

Moreover, the artist’s own position in relation to his work is itself fairly ambiguous, since it too is constantly evolving. Is Farmer the demiurge who—as the title *Entrepreneur Alone Returning Back to Sculptural Form*



suggests – orchestrates the transformation of businessman into sculpture? Or is he the artist who through implicit (but nevertheless fully acknowledged) references to other artists expresses his allegiance to a certain way of thinking, a certain sensibility? Or, again, is he the individual concealed behind the first person singular of some of the titles, like *I thought that I could make a machine that would pierce the fabric of reality, in your world it appears as a 16th-century sign* (2004)? We also seem to catch glimpses of him in the allusions to Vancouver, or in the evocations of literary worlds with which we assume (rightly or wrongly) he feels an affinity, or in the particular preoccupation with the poetic potential of apparently ordinary situations. By assuming multiple roles, Farmer seems to place himself in the forefront of the space opened up by his work. Yet sometimes his presence appears strangely discreet. Thus, the apparent aspiration of certain works to encompass everything could come across as a surprising reluctance to choose.

“‘What does it matter who is speaking,’ someone said, ‘What does it matter who is speaking?’” Beckett’s words<sup>11</sup> seem to resonate with the paradox on which Farmer’s work is constructed. On the one hand, we sense a kind of indifference: it doesn’t matter what the subject is, since the whole universe can provide material for art. But on the other, this (apparent) indifference results in the creation of a work and the taking of a position by, inevitably, an individual—an author.

Every work of art raises, more or less explicitly, the matter of the author’s status. In his adoption of a position that is simultaneously distant and involved, in interventions that are at once restrained and radical—and thus *engagé*—Farmer seems to be exploring the issue with particular intelligence and acuity. His practice advances from one work to the next like a long parade, controlled yet colourful, in which the “author function” is replayed again and again—constantly shifting and, as a result, constantly questioned.

1. The two other works included in *The Blacking Factory* were *Box With the Sound of Its Own Making* (2002), a video showing the façade of the Contemporary Art Gallery apparently in the process of being blown up, and *Daily Times* (2002), which resembled a newspaper machine. Like *Trailer*, both were simulations.
2. In the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal exhibition *Trailer* is displayed in the middle of a gallery containing several other works, between which it helps to establish a subtle but clearly discernible narrative thread.
3. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987), p. 272.
4. “Entrepreneur alone returning back to sculptural form: An interview with Geoffrey Farmer by Andrew Bonacina,” *Uovo*, no. 13 (April 28, 2007), p. 260.
5. Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), pp. 142–143.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
7. Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” trans. Josué V. Harari, in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 101–120.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
9. Some of Farmer’s solo shows have continued to change as the exhibition progressed. One example is *Catriona Jeffries Catriona*, held in Vancouver at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery in the fall of 2001.
10. For example, the title *Entrepreneur Alone Returning Back to Sculptural Form*, or the space-time opened up by *Notes for Strangers*.
11. Quoted by Foucault in “What Is an Author?” (see note 7 above), p. 101.

Having worked as an assistant curator at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (1983) and at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal (1983–88), PIERRE LANDRY has been a curator at the latter institution since 1988. He has conceived and organized solo exhibitions of the works of numerous artists, including Sylvie Bouchard, Melvin Charney, Jean-Pierre Gauthier, Stéphane Gilot, Pascal Grandmaison, Micah Lexier, Jean-Paul Mousseau (retrospective) and Sam Taylor-Wood. Notable among the group exhibitions he has curated are *Le Geste oublié* (1987), *L’Origine des choses* (1994) and “*Nous venons en paix...*” – *Histoires des Amériques* (2004). Aside from the many essays he has written for catalogues published by the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, he has contributed exhibition reviews to a variety of art magazines.

(Translated by Judith Terry)