

Everything Counts

REID SHIER

Sunset Blvd.
EXT: Paramount Gate

MAX: To see Mr. DeMille. Open the gate.

GUARD: Mr. DeMille is shooting. You got an appointment?

MAX: No appointment necessary. I'm bringing Norma Desmond.

GUARD: Norma who?

During the weeks *The Blacking Factory* was on exhibit at the Contemporary Art Gallery, a newspaper coin box was positioned outside the gallery's entrance. The box appeared to (and in fact may actually) date from the 1970s or 80s. It held a generic newspaper from an unspecified American city. Under the headline "The Future Becomes a Reality" a short text described the maiden voyage of a bullet train linking San Diego with San Francisco that would later travel "as far north as Vancouver, BC." The body of other stories on the front page repeated single paragraphs of generic text over and over until they composed columns, their meaning a simple visual one: to appear from a distance, and on camera, as real. *Daily Times* (2002) is made of props, rented by the artist from a film set supply company.

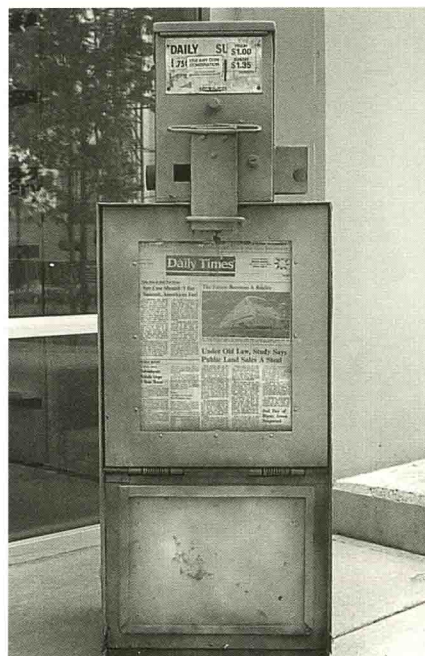
The narratives of the daily news offer many stories. Some become movies and television shows, others books and novels. Geoffrey Farmer is interested in how daily events are processed and digested before returning as representation and fiction. In *Daily Times*, however, the context of that representation is itself a fiction. As the first work visitors to *The Blacking Factory* encounter, even before entering the gallery, *Daily Times* hints at what is to be found through the doors. Context is under question and frames of reference — the systems by which information is conveyed — are not necessarily to be taken on faith. At the outset, Farmer provides introductory clues to how *The Blacking Factory* challenges the nature of our encounters inside.

Here viewers see two further works, the first a monumental one-to-one replica of a 28-foot truck trailer filling the BC Binning Gallery, the larger of the Contemporary Art Gallery's two exhibition spaces. Farmer employed a film industry special effects house to assist him in its construction. *Trailer* (2002)

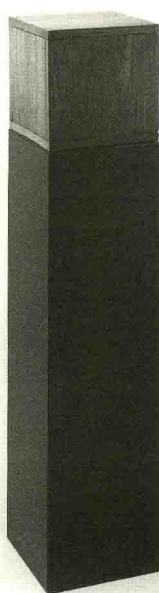
is made of a simple steel endoskeleton, onto which a veneer of pressboard and a variety of real and artificial elements are attached. Wheels with an axle support the structure. A mock suspension system and a gas tank hang underneath. The piece also has no floor or roof. Its mimicry, or illusionism, concludes at a degree of verisimilitude necessary for viewing it from the side, at an average height and at a slight distance, as might be required for a camera on a film shoot. Situated in an art gallery, it begs certain questions. Is it a sculpture of a truck trailer or an artifact of a film? That is, is it art or a prop?

The question is at the heart of *The Blacking Factory*. What, exactly, is this trailer? The meticulous detailing of its construction is enough to convince on first inspection but not so much on a closer look. One can surmise that this isn't an exercise in mimetic artistic skill. Artifice here is based on stage construction and faux-finishing techniques. The rivets on the exterior panels are silver painted thumb tacks with the points knocked off. The body panels are melamine, and the aluminum used to join these panels, wood spray-painted silver. Integrally, the trailer isn't a representation of a new, or even a clean one. It is surfaced with faux mud (paint) caking the gas tank and mud flaps, and staining and dirt (paint again) streaking the trailer's sides (the vehicle appears to have traveled some distance on the road). Yet the intent of *Trailer* isn't as a component of a movie. Rather, it's a sculpture designed with the parameters of its inaugural venue — the Contemporary Art Gallery's BC Binning Gallery — in mind. The scaling of the trailer within this space — it's odd, working realism coupled with its monumental size — gives the impression of a ship in a bottle. Even those who understand it as a fabrication express curiosity about how it got in. The frisson of seeing something that would normally be seen on a highway or a city street in a room that can barely accommodate it, is — and in subsequent exhibitions will remain — a crucial part of the pleasure of first encountering the piece. But the realization, some moments on, of something being faked, begins to provide clues to the intricate networks Farmer elaborates with respect to the places in which his art is displayed.

In the Alvin Balkind Gallery, the Contemporary Art Gallery's smaller exhibition space, Farmer exhibited a more pointedly sight-specific work, a DVD



Geoffrey Farmer, *Daily Times*, 2002



Robert Morris, *Box With the Sound of Its Own Making*
(1961) *Seattle Art Museum PHOTO CREDIT: Paul Macapia.
Robert Morris/ARS (New York)/SODRAC (Montreal) 2003

projection titled *A Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (2002). This DVD depicts the windows of this gallery being destroyed by an explosion. The film opens with an establishing shot of the exterior of the Contemporary Art Gallery at night and cuts to a close up of its plate-glass corner windows. After a long pause, an explosion shatters the windows and their frames. The sound of a rolling aftershock dissipates along with a debris cloud, after which the windows slowly recompose and, cinematically, heal themselves. Here the shot cuts back to the overview and the DVD begins again.

The title of this piece is borrowed from a work by American artist Robert Morris, who in 1961 manufactured a 10-inch-square cube out of wooden planks and included within it a speaker hooked to a tape recorder that played sounds from the three and a half hours of sawing and hammering it took to construct. In the early 1960s Morris' gesture was a significant departure from prevailing ideas about the nature of art objects, specifically the "presentness and instantaneousness"¹ of paintings by modernists like Frank Stella, Jules Olitski and Kenneth Noland. In his essay *Notes on Sculpture*, published in early 1966, Morris outlines the beginnings of this new approach and opens by drawing a distinction between his practice and painting. He argues that sculpture, or more pointedly "objects," have the possibility of relationships that transcend the work in and of itself, and make them a "... function of space, light, and the viewer's *field of vision*" [italics mine]. Morris continues:

The object is but one of the terms in the newer aesthetic. It is in some way more reflexive because one's awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships. One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context.²

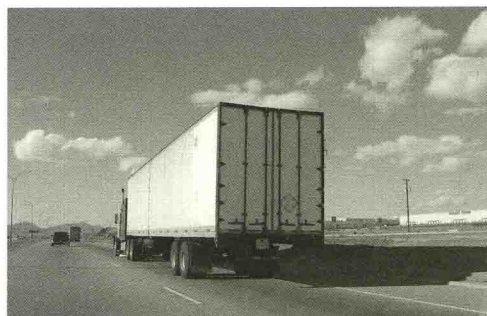
¹ Fried, Michael; *Art and Objecthood*, quoted in *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, ed.'s Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, Blackwell Publishers, 2003, p 845 ² Morris, Robert; *Note on Sculpture II*, quoted in *Art in Theory 1900-2000*, ed.'s Charles Harrison & Paul Wood, Blackwell Publishers, 2003, p 832

Later, he synthesizes this more concretely:
 “The experience of the work exists in time.”

In *Box with the Sound of Its Own Making* (1961) Morris introduces a pointed, humorous reminder of some of the parameters (time, money and labour) that define the manufacture of artwork. This “larger field of vision” infuriated some critics, Michael Fried in particular, who lambasted Morris (and Donald Judd) for the “theatricality” of their work. For Fried any time-based appreciation or apprehension of art was anathema. “Art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre,”³ he exclaimed, citing the work of a number of artists as examples, John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg in particular, whom he singled out for his harshest (and most homophobic) vilification. He described the work of these artists as “literalist” and thought it failed precisely in measure to how much it included within the viewer’s frame:

It is, I think worth remarking that ‘the entire situation’ [as Judd phrased it] means exactly that: *all* of it—including it seems, the beholders’ *body*. [...] Everything counts—not as part of the object, but as part of the situation in which its objecthood is established and on which that objecthood at least partly depends.⁴

In naming his video after Morris’ work, Farmer draws a parallel between the minimalist wooden cube and the symmetrical cube-like space of the Contemporary Art Gallery’s Balkind Gallery. Farmer extends the implications of Morris’ context driven and temporal approach to question how one looks at a work within *this* contemporary art gallery. The gallery is the artwork, both as the subject of Farmer’s video and also explicitly as an object itself, an architectural surround in which viewers stand for a period of time, and as such, a context that produces conditions of appreciation and reception. In asking how the gallery is “made”, Farmer questions the systems which support and maintain *this* gallery, and in the broader view, the underpinnings of a contemporary public gallery system in general.

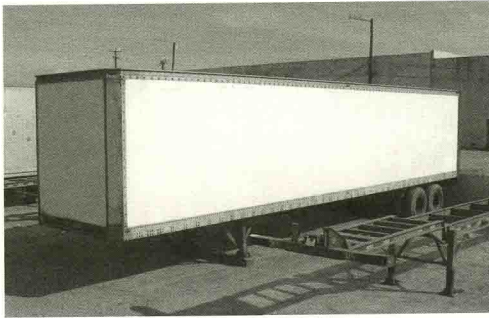


³ Fried, Michael p 843 ⁴ Fried, Michael; p 839

Farmer asks how a field of vision is conditioned by the space in which one sees.

A standardized architecture of contemporary art galleries has proved remarkably resilient over the past number of decades. The practicality of the white cube (even if it is never precisely a white cube) is still the predominant vehicle for indoor exhibitions, and work intended for walls or floors is well-served by the design. Beyond these concerns, however, there is a psycho-social neutrality to which four white walls with little architectural ornament purport. The continuity between the design and the modernist project under which it was first developed remains surprisingly fresh. Notions of timelessness and immediacy are not too distant from notions of universalized context, or at least one professing its neutrality. Implicitly underpinning the modernist gallery are successfully proven, resilient, ideological supports.

But the blast of the explosion in Farmer's video poses a conundrum. Unlike Morris' sawing and hammering—the sound of construction and creation—the noise is of the gallery blowing apart. Farmer apparently is not so much interested in the fabrication of this frame as he is in destroying it, at least on first glance. The explosion, notwithstanding its fictitiousness (it's modeled on, and appears like it would fit comfortably in a Hollywood genre film), is well executed and the sound does indeed shock. As mentioned, however, the windows “heal” themselves, and the damage repairs and reforms in advance of the cycle looping. No explanation is given for the cause of the explosion, or for how the windows reform. One presumption, that the shattering glass represents the desire to blow apart the constraints the walls of the gallery metaphorically symbolize, may or may not be the case. In the end the walls are mended (as atonement, or simply as a way of providing for the video's ongoing repetition), or the gallery could be seen to heal itself (to show that mere physical damage can have little effect on the efficacy of the contemporary gallery as it is currently constituted). The only clue Farmer provides is in the title, which suggests the gallery is constructed through an act of destruction, that it is made in violence.



Trailer research, Vancouver, BC

EXT: Paramount Stage 18

MAX: You see those offices there Mr. Gillis?
They used to be Madam's dressing room.
The *whole* row.

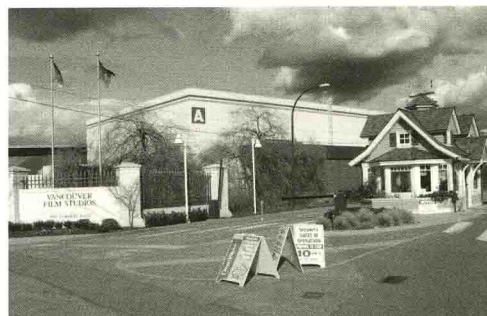
JOE: That didn't leave much for Wallace
Reed.

MAX: Oh, he had a great big bungalow on
wheels. I had the upstairs. You see where it
says 'Reader's Department'? I remember my
walls were covered with black patent leather.

In a semi-developed light-industrial area on the eastern edge of Vancouver, a number of old warehouses have been developed into a large film production facility called the Vancouver Film Studios. As part of their conversion, the buildings, now mostly soundstages, have been painted off-white and branded around the roofline with twin strips of aquamarine and sky blue. What started out as a few rented spaces has grown over the past number of years as Hollywood production budgets, exploiting a devalued Canadian dollar and more lax Canadian union strictures, continues to pour north. In its wake, the soundstages and production offices have mushroomed proportionately.

In the middle of this burgeoning neighborhood is a Costco wholesale store where I occasionally shop. Coincidentally, it's painted in similar colours to the soundstages and as a result is not too out of place. Still, I imagine not a few studio executives must eye the lease on Costco's building. The bumper-to-bumper jostling of us shoppers—loaded with *Land of the Giants* Cheerios boxes and month's worth of bulk noodles is, needless to say, different from the effect of walking onto the Paramount or Universal lot. In East Van, there's no psychic threshold—no gilded, guarded wrought iron marking off the studio turf. Only a little road divides movie magic from a big-box wholesaler.

There is a (peculiarly neo-colonial) gatehouse entrance to the Vancouver Film Studios, but in contrast to Vancouver's two other main production studios, this East Van studio has no barrier around the full perimeter of its buildings. North Vancouver's Lions Gate Studios, for instance, has a fence that includes a large postmodern gateway in the vein



TOP: Front Gate, Lions Gate Studios, North Vancouver, BC

BOTTOM: Entrance, Vancouver Film Studios, Vancouver, BC



Film studios, East Vancouver, BC

of Paramount, complete with an arching three-story entranceway. I wonder whether the Vancouver Film Studios is an exception, and that a boundary, and its broader implications—a separation between the public and the production of films—is still a desire if not a necessity.

As costs for large films escalate, so too does the need for powerful studios to finance and broker their production. The larger of these: Paramount, MGM and Universal, are, after some shaky years of skepticism about their sustainability and relevance, finding ways to remain alive. Their repositories of films and television shows make them, at least on paper, lucrative additions to the portfolios of other, larger multinationals. But my question isn't so much one of authority or capital as it is symbolism. Has the nature of the contemporary studio system developed beyond the need for showy ostentation? Have wrought-iron gates gone the way of black patent leather walls? There is something curiously old-fashioned, even more so because of its hokey updating, in the archway to Lions Gate.

The question becomes transparent when production on a film demands an exterior shot and when studios pack up and move to location. British Columbia's wide diversity of landscapes and a variety of urban and rural backdrops act as a third incentive for film makers to come North. As a result, Vancouverites have a now long-standing familiarity with fleets of white truck trailers—movie and television production vehicles—parked at the side of their streets. The circus-train feel is heralded days in advance by the posting of temporary no parking signs with requisite dates and times on the lamp standards lining the street. On a given morning, the semis back their trailers into place. Their exteriors are uniform, generally well-cleaned and blank-white. No indication is given of their contents, not even for those whose job it must be to maintain them.

Yet the intention isn't disguise. While the trailers are being packed or unpacked it's easy to look inside. There are prop and special effects trailers, ones for camera and lighting equipment, others for electrical cabling, still more for costumes, set dec and wardrobe. There are movable dressing rooms and makeup trailers, often the only ones that allow sig-

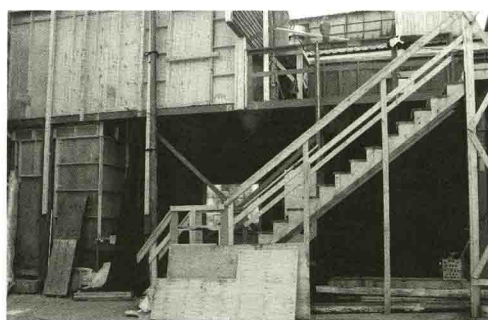
nage, at least a place for an actor's name on the door (above the line stars have their own RVs). And, as one exception-that-proves-the-rule, at least in Vancouver, there's a fleet of brightly coloured, hot-pink catering trucks with the name Reel Appetites. The company provides buffets of sandwiches and salvers of above-average food for crews on location.

These buffets can be a sensitive issue according to the Vancouver Film Office, which oversee productions in the city:

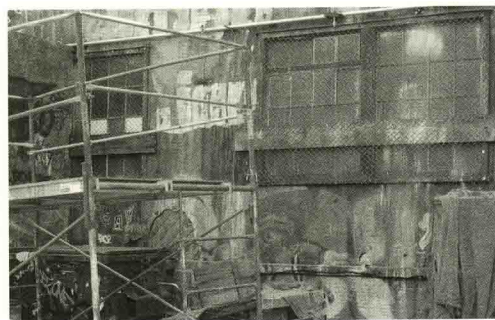
... especially in neighbourhoods where poverty and homelessness are prevalent. There are some areas in which catering must not be visible to the public. Cast and crew may be required to cover their food when walking from the catering facilities to an eating area.⁵

Perhaps the reason the trailers are left blank white is, then, not to prevent theft but, like hiding good food from someone who's poor, a way to maintain a respectable distance.

On location this division between inside and out is subtly constructed. Security personal and off-duty police maintain the physical safety of the crew and define a perimeter, both real and psychic, between those working and those watching. Yet there is a greater divide at stake. Embodied in the blank sides of the truck trailers is an orchestrated illustration of privilege that appears not just in the service of maintaining a *remove* but also as an effort at *advertising* that fact. In contrast to a hot pink catering truck (an independent contractor), the absence of any name, colour or insignia on the production trailers speaks emphatically of the tactlessness of advertising—and of the need, long transcended, to be noticed. But even this isn't quite accurate. Rather than signify “if you have to ask you can't afford it,” the trailers ask passersby to keep *away*. Notwithstanding their mostly cheap and utilitarian requirements, the white production vehicles are significant for their privileged demand of privacy. Can one advertise privacy? Is this an oxymoron? In *Chromophobia*, David Batchelor writes about being



⁵ The City of Vancouver Engineering Services maintains this website: <http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/engsvcs/projects/filmoffice/keepinmind.htm>



Alley Set, film studios, East Vancouver, BC

invited for dinner to the house of an art collector in the early 1990s. The interior of the house was an all-encompassing white, which he described as like being inside an egg and which imposed within it an equally encompassing silence:

This was assertive silence, emphatic blankness, the kind of ostentatious emptiness that only the very wealthy and utterly sophisticated can afford. It was a strategic emptiness, but also accusatory.⁶

Unlike advertising (or at least salesmanship), which is a public act that addresses and instills desire, whiteness here is about absence and exclusion. The white sides of a movie production trailer, as much as the white walls of this art collector's house, speak of having, and implicitly of *not* offering.

INT: Stairway

MAX: Quiet everybody! Lights! Are you ready Norma?

NORMA: What is the scene? Where am I?

MAX: This is the staircase of the palace!

NORMA: Oh, yes! Yes! Down below, they're waiting for the princess. I'm ready.

Prior to his exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery, Farmer created and installed a month long "process-based" work in the commercial gallery which currently represents him. *Catriona Jeffries Catriona*, in contrast to *The Blacking Factory*, was made up of a multiplying inventory of sculptural elements created in and for the gallery over the course of 62 days, alongside a number of videos shot on sight and screened on monitors. Some of these elements remained for the full course of the show, others appeared and disappeared. Crude conduits, ducting and tubes made of plastic and cardboard traced the routes between the upstairs gallery and downstairs office. Farmer created a Styrofoam banister that echoed and mirrored the banister of the staircase bridging the two spaces. Reflections such as this one occurred throughout the exhibition and over the course of the show. Visitors to the gallery could expect

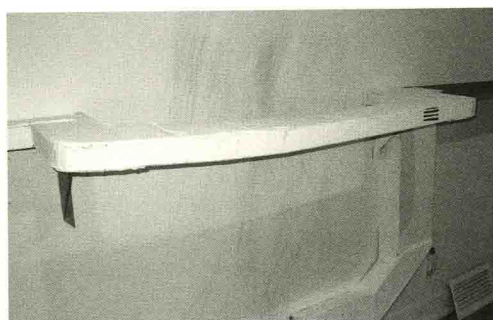
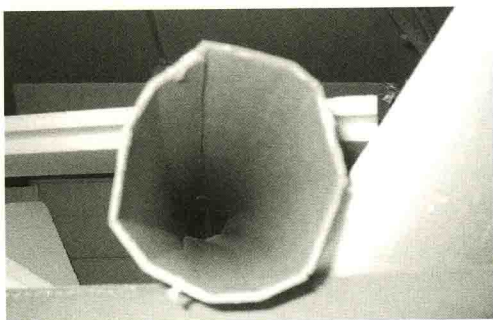
⁶ Batchelor, David; *Chromophobia*, Reaktion Books, London, 2000, p 10

to find different things on successive days: the only consistency was in the recurrence of eerie doublings.

Among its referents, *Catriona Jeffries Catriona* alluded to another of Robert Morris' works, *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (1969). Over the course of three weeks in March 1969, Morris occupied the Leo Castelli Warehouse in NYC and created an ongoing, mutating installation. Each day, Morris composed, arranged and destroyed an assortment of forms using a variety of materials including clay, earth, cotton, plastic, water and grease. He described the piece as relating to "viscera, muscles, primal energies, after-birth, feces ..." and called it "a work of the bowels, very moving shit, etc."⁷ Beyond the correlation of durational processes, one of the crucial correspondences between Farmer's work in the *Catriona Jeffries Gallery* and Morris' Castelli show is an echoing concern with ideas of flux, transmutation and transport. Farmer's conduits and ducting exteriorize what in any architectural space is usually found behind the walls and tucked out of sight, much as skin hides those parts of the body Morris' work at the Castelli Warehouse approximated and brought to mind. For Farmer, however, the transport of fluids, be they water, gas or things more protean, is literalized and made into a metaphor for the movement between intellectual capital and hard currency, between the space of display (and digestion)—the gallery—and a site of cash transactions—the office. In a commercial gallery this exchange, as the primary and fundamental objective, remains the key to the gallerist's and artist's continued sustainability. The contemporary, non-profit, public gallery on the other hand, provides for its continuance and health through governmental support (in Canada, in any case) and backing by donors, foundations and philanthropic supporters. Within this sphere the production of cultural value is orchestrated without an observable bias brought on through the taint of personal gain. Exhibits are sanctioned, foremost, as the products of professionalized curatorship whose aesthetic taste and intellectual labor ostensibly serve altruistic interests. Curators become interlocutors or intermediaries between artists and the public.

⁷ Excerpt from the unpublished journal Morris kept while making *Continuous Project Altered Daily*. Quoted in *Robert Morris; The Mind/Body Problem*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, NY, 1994, p 234.





Installation views, *Catriona Jeffries Catriona*, 2001

That this altruism can be far from the case should be of little surprise. But the point is not to inventory the sometimes self-serving and careerist agendas of curators, but to draw out the necessary interdependencies between public and private galleries in the production and maintenance of an economic system. The two are intimately linked in so far as the dollar value of artist's products—paintings, installations, photographs, what-have-you—is floated against the broader intellectual and cultural capital these works incur *outside* the commercial system, within contemporary public galleries, biennales and large scale museum collections and exhibitions. These mechanisms are largely transparent to anyone familiar with the contemporary art market. What can remain hidden, however, is not how the value of a painting or an installation is made but how an economy of those who *provide* that value is maintained.

The often featureless face of the public gallery conceals as much as it shows. A profound example can be found in the subtle distinctions between the architecture of commercial galleries and those of public spaces. There is, peculiarly, often a greater sense of public access in commercial spaces than within those that term themselves public. While there is often little difference (outside of scale) between individual exhibition spaces, which are circumscribed in almost every case by some configuration of white walls illuminated by track lighting, the offices of the commercial gallery are, in many cases, accessible so that they invite the possibility of transactions. Commercial gallerists can't presuppose who might walk in and want to buy a work of art. Public galleries, in contrast, don't need to concern themselves with this practicality and tend to exercise a more constrained right to privacy. This is often orchestrated through the slightest and most discrete means: a rope across a staircase, a no entry sign on a door. At the Contemporary Art Gallery a slender piece of wood on the landing of the staircase declares: "Private Offices No Entry". The privileged terrain these barriers and signs mark off is on the one hand necessary, as it maintains a cloistered space for intellectual and administrative labour. Yet this division presumes the necessity of a hierarchical separation between those looking at art from those whose job it is to frame it. The distance between

these two realms is physically proximate—just a step over a line—but psychically great. Like the egg-like walls of the collector's house, or the white sides of movie production vehicles, barriers not only ask for privacy but advertise the unimportance, one might say inadequacy, of those who haven't been granted access across the threshold and into a private realm.

The distinction between the commercial and public gallery systems here becomes acute. Access 'behind the scenes,' to an inner circle of artists, dealers, critics and art world professionals, has become more than ever a service provided to the clientele of the commercial system.⁸ The public gallery, on the other hand, erects a barrier that few can ignore who haven't extraordinary sums of money (such as sponsors to entire exhibitions), considerable art-related training, or already established gallery credentials. Here the elitism of public galleries discloses itself. Access is brokered as a way of maintaining the right to contextualize the trade in art and to whom payment will be given for that service.

In this context the "mud" staining *The Blacking Factory's* Trailer is important as a record of its transitory state, of the distance it has traveled and will travel. In like fashion, the shattering glass in *Box With the Sound of Its Own Making* loudly describes an event in some larger, ongoing story. But while evoking themes of transition and flux, Farmer does not use them, as he did in *Catriona Jeffries Catriona*, to explicitly unify the gallery's spaces. Here dirt and destruction simply muddy and puncture the homogenously pristine. The timeless neutrality of the white surface is violated in order to give the viewer an indication, however fleeting, of an actual time and place. Taken together, *Trailer*, *Box With the Sound of Its Own Making* and *Daily Times* turn inside out and outside in, and it is these inversions that remind us of the gallery's own contingent nature, that it too came from somewhere and will one day disappear. If it is not to become a tomb, the gallery must to some degree embrace this contingency and admit to the evanescence of its trace.

⁸ See Thomas Crow, "The Return of Hank Herron: Simulated Abstraction and the Service Economy of Art" in *Modern Art in the Common Culture* (New Haven: Yale, 1996), pages 69-84, 250-251