

Follow the Money
Reid Shier



Shier, Reid. "Follow the Money." *Ron Terada*. Vancouver: Contemporary Art Gallery, 2003. 7-17.

My use of isolated presentation elements disclosed the existence of mediation devices as functioning elements in their own right.

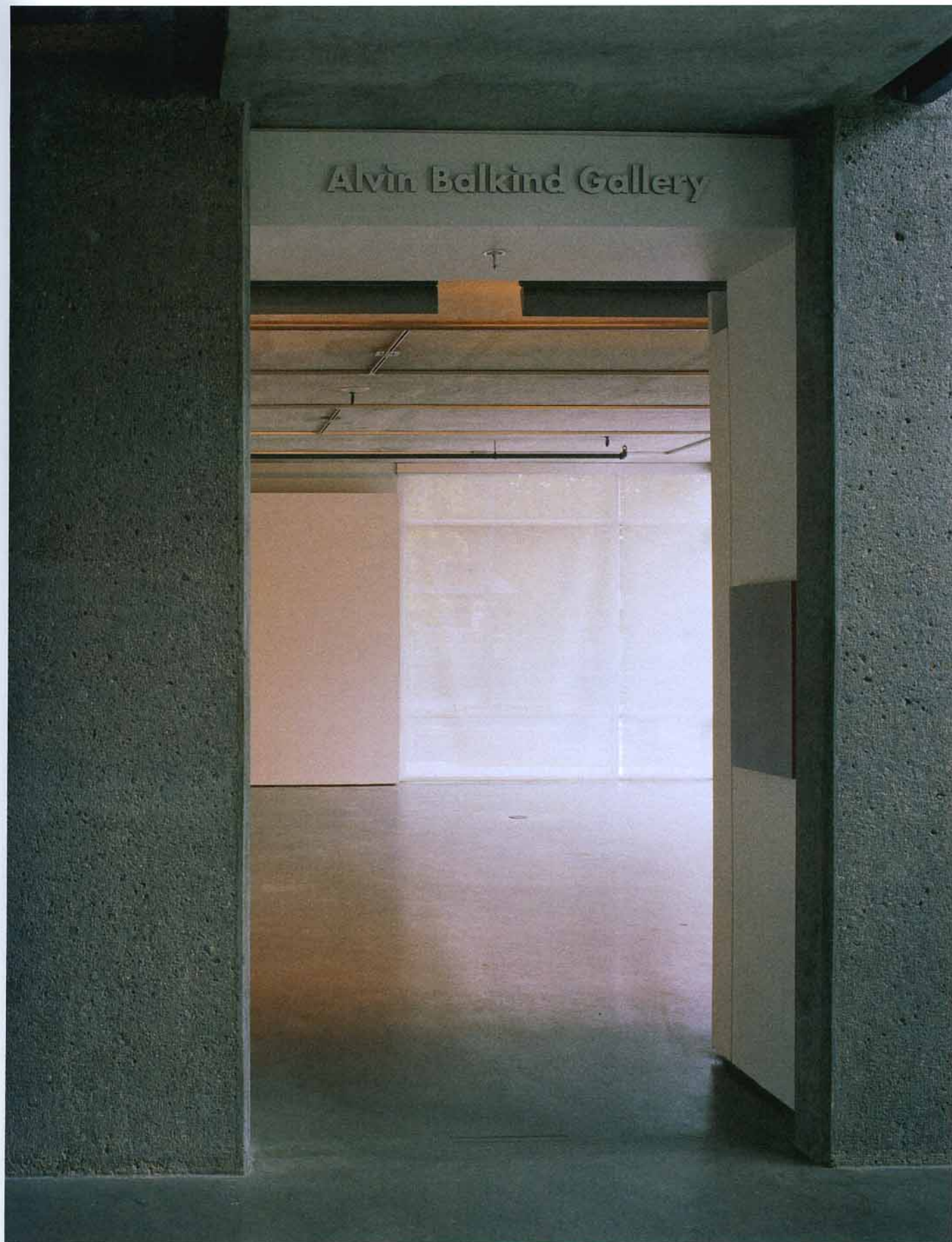
– Michael Asher¹

“He must have done it for the money,” and “He must have done it out of inner necessity” are internally and casually related-parts of the same body.

– Art & Language²

Ron Terada's *Catalogue* will cost around \$40,000 [CDN] to produce. More or less is uncertain, but as I write this in early September 2003, the book is budgeted for about that many dollars. The book's production is currently in progress so that it'll be ready at the opening of Terada's show on November 20, 2003. It *must* be ready by this date, but the criticality of the timeline isn't due to the necessity of having didactic support on hand for the run of the exhibition. It is after all a common (if not ideal) practicality that catalogues, especially ones for relatively young artists like Terada without extensive bodies of work, often come out well *after* the exhibition opens. This catalogue is different. While its purpose remains explanatory, promotional and documentary (like catalogues it mimics), it's also the *art* of Terada's show.

I mention cost to preface an explanation of how the money was acquired. Over the past four months sponsors have been asked to donate the production money for the catalogue's completion. Those who agreed (many said no) are mostly individuals, but also include some businesses and corporations (which paid more). As a condition of giving money they understand that they will receive a signed edition of a photographic print – limited in number to the total sponsors of the show – by Ron Terada, and importantly, that their names will function as more art in Terada's exhibition at the Contemporary Art Gallery. Sponsors will have their names featured within the pages of this publication as well as on the gallery's walls and the glass of its street-front windows. The art, then, is *both* this catalogue and the names of the people who paid for it.



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A cardinal achievement of Terada's work is how neatly it embodies and incorporates its own critical support and explication. As the curator of Terada's show I am also directly implicated in the artwork's production, so that my labour is, in effect, co-opted into the work itself. The question of where I am positioned in relation to Terada's project provokes my interest, (already heightened and attuned to the ways Terada is utilizing me), in the myriad ways the artist's project draws attention to the relationships between the principle organizers of an exhibition at a public art gallery. These include the artist (Terada); the gallery personnel (me and those I work with as well as catalogue contributors contracted to work on the show); anyone with a direct investment in the artist, such as collectors and any commercial dealer who sells his or her work (in Terada's case the Catriona Jeffries Gallery); and, finally, those who support and pay for the exhibit – the funders of the gallery and the show's sponsors, some of whose names are detailed on the pages of this artwork. All are implicated in the process of organizing and financing the production of Terada's "catalogue," yet, in the context of other self-reflexive artworks (beginning in earnest ninety years ago with Duchamp's fountain/urinal), Terada's work doesn't appear to offer any fundamental critique of the system these people represent and are a part of. Everyone, to some measure, stands to gain from this project by terms that are common and understandable. If so, Terada's aim may simply be to corrupt and shift the terms of the contract between artist and gallery for the purposes of this one show. If it is, sidestepping questions about the efficacy of the current art world status quo might be the natural outcome of a project that aims to exploit the system for the artist's own gain. That this comes at the behest and with the sanction

of the gallery itself is, on first glance, not much more than a mark of the knowledge and complicity of all those involved.

Still, by avoiding any outward critical posture Terada invites a question about whether he is acting in good faith. Even if one were to believe Terada's answer, the question might still hang in the balance. What, after all, does the artist intend when his vehicle – the catalogue and/or art – fits so comfortably into the deep ruts of the contemporary art market? If Terada's publication were realized in some material distinction to other artist's catalogues, perhaps we viewers and readers might trust it as art and not self-promotion. The question is left to linger, however, and brings to mind other instances of artists defending themselves against accusations of self-interest. It's a common narrative, nevertheless one so acutely framed within this project that one is led to ask why questions of artistic integrity are so necessary to answer.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Not having actually seen the catalogue, it's a mistake to presuppose what form it will take. My writing is premised on what Terada has told me, and he has said he simply wants the look of the catalogue to appear to be *inappropriate* for an artist of his reputation and stature. Obviously, better catalogues cost more money, but in the art world, especially within a non-profit public gallery (like the one that employs me), catalogue production is appreciated and scrutinized for a simple reason: catalogues are a critical stock in trade – they are *our* product – and alongside rewarding artists with exhibition opportunities, are a fundamental way of sanctioning those whose work we like. Here, the quality and detail of catalogue production is important.



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Galleries and museums with bigger operating budgets afford more and bigger catalogues. Unlike a mass-market novel or cookbook, the production value of an artist's catalogue transparently advertises the type of institution producing it.

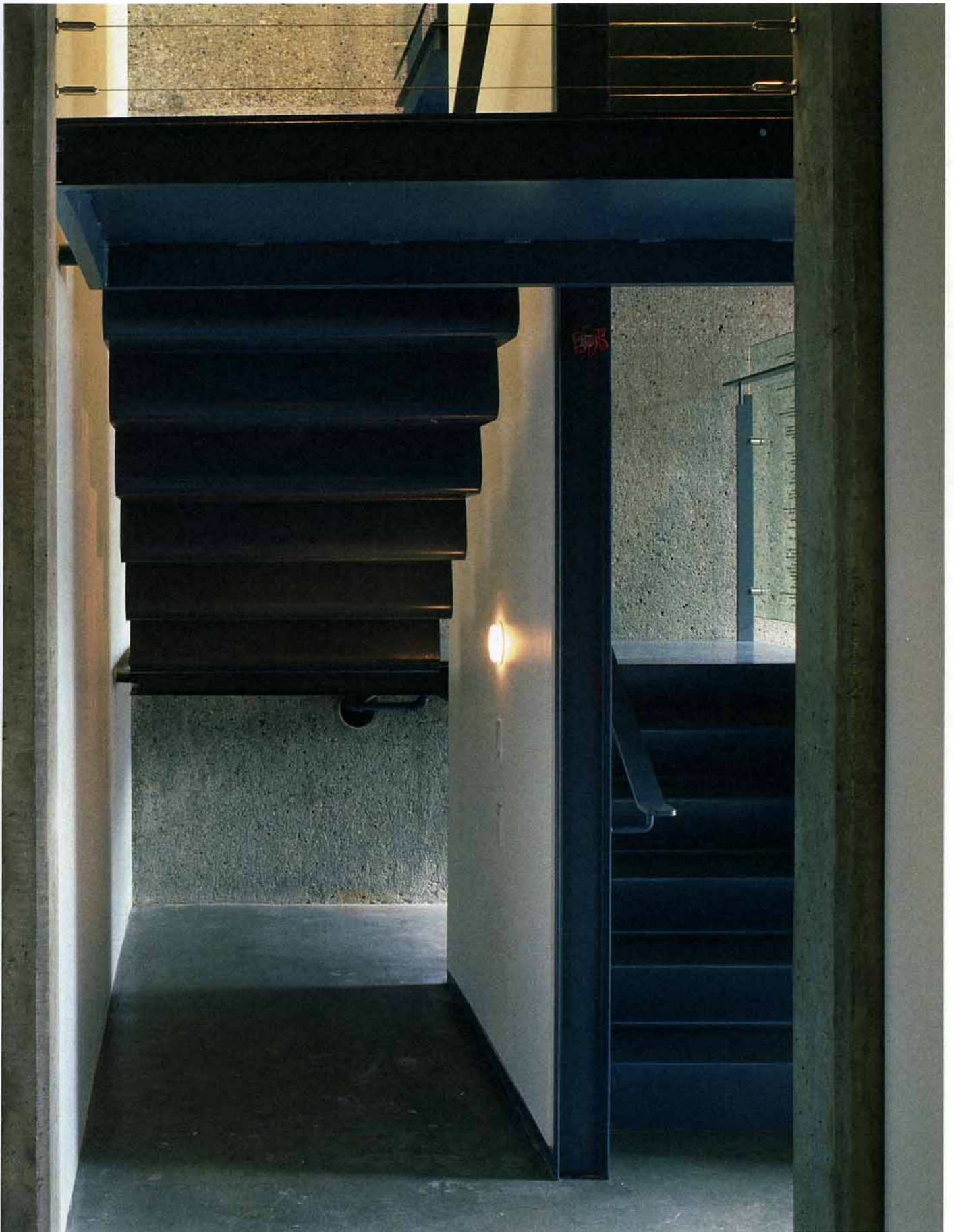
If there is truth to the generalization that bigger is better (which I don't refute), why stop here? Why isn't Terada's catalogue truly and excessively extravagant? If the project hinges on being inappropriately sized, why not grotesquely so? \$35,000 to \$40,000 is a sum far greater than the Contemporary Art Gallery would normally put toward the production of an exhibition catalogue (our budgets normally hover around \$15,000), yet New York's Museum of Modern Art, as an example, might invest \$100,000 [USD] into a catalogue for a prominent artist's retrospective. Why not aim for this relatively vast sum?

Part of the answer hinges on a certain level of practicality. The scale of ambition (and measure of feasibility) introduced into Terada's project at an early stage was considered in relation to the available resources and a practical sense of possibility. No one, myself included, thought it would be realistic to consider asking for, let alone raising \$100,000 for the project. But in thinking over these self-imposed limitations, it's clear that some level of explanation about how and why these limitations were arrived at is necessary, especially for anyone unfamiliar with the intricacies of institutional visual arts funding. Any explanation must also take into account the singular reliance, in this instance, on a number of individual donations by a large group of people who have helped facilitate the project. While philanthropy of this order could be expected by and for a large

museum exhibition, it may be one of the first of its kind (in Canada certainly), for a discrete solo exhibition by a moderately well-known emerging artist.

The complexity of the relationships between those financing and organizing an artist's exhibition is never easy to fix, and is compounded by variables extraordinarily specific to time and place. In Canada, for example, the operating budget of a public gallery like the Contemporary Art Gallery is largely drawn from government grants. In contrast, a similarly sized organization in the United States might rely on philanthropic foundations and family run endowments in the absence of public support. In England, like Canada, there is extensive government funding, but corporations are often called in to supplement and support shows. Corporate sponsorship is also common in the United States, but a rarity in Canada (perhaps because of our governmental support), outside the larger civic museums. To quantify the specifics of cultural arts funding, which is idiosyncratic not only to nations, but to regions, is extremely difficult, and points to the impossibility of making any generalizations when describing the flow of money through contemporary visual arts venues. Galleries get their money in many ways, none exactly the same.

That money is to be made from artists goes without saying. In today's global art market, public galleries – almost exclusively not-for-profit institutions – contribute profoundly to the accreditation and legitimation that underwrites the dollar value of an artist's work. Catalogues, while providing didactic and explanatory help to those unfamiliar with an artist, are a central component of this legitimation. Catalogues disseminate artist's work around the globe



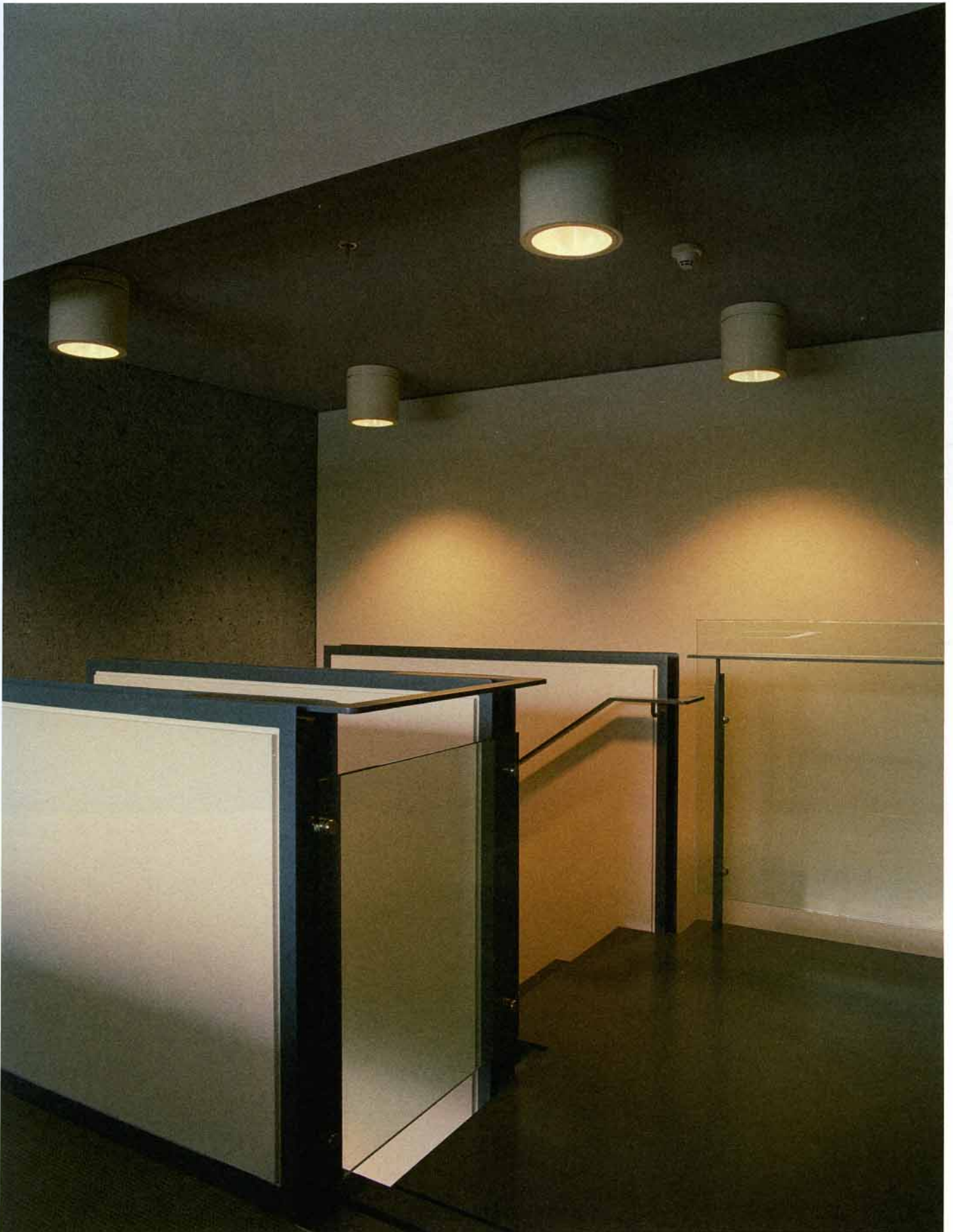
effective and utilitarian tools (or as Kelly Wood points out, a “mobile and liquid form in advance of the product”) used to inform and promote work to curators, critics, dealers, collectors and others interested in an artist’s practice. Their efficacy and authority is achieved partly from their production value. Artist’s catalogues (or those for shows in which an artist is included), come with the assurance the artist has been sanctioned by someone holding a position of privilege within the field. This isn’t simply because a curator has chosen this artist over others, but because the institution responsible for producing the catalogue – in most cases a public gallery capable of financing their considerable expense (and the exhibitions they accompany) – *employs* (has chosen), those who have chosen the artist. The more expensive the product the more status accrues the subject of that product. Because Terada’s catalogue fakes an economy of a much larger institution, it rewards him as well as the Contemporary Art Gallery with a perceptually greater status in kind.

But could Terada’s catalogue have been budgeted for more money? Could he have tried to reap more status by attempting a bigger fundraising effort? Given the limit on the amount of money available from government sources, any extra the gallery might afford for individual exhibitions has to be met by individual or corporate donations. The money collected for Terada’s project reflects the good will of more than a third of those people and corporations who received solicitations on behalf of Terada by his dealer Catriona Jeffries and the Contemporary Art Gallery’s Director Christina Ritchie. The elite social circles and clientele of the two galleries were effectively mined for potential collaborators, and as a generalization, the further

outside this circle the letters went, the less successful the fundraising became. The scope of the field of donors who contributed to Terada’s project gives a good indication of the parameters of a social caste that surrounds and supports these particular organizations. More than anything, understanding the breadth of this milieu – and within it the extent of support for and interest in Terada’s art – led to the sense of what the project’s scale was to be.

Similar cultural organizations are surrounded by similar social milieus, which offer the organization not only money, but reflection, accreditation and validation. Cultural organizations (galleries in particular) act in reciprocation as a hub around which circles of artists and culturally minded people – among them ones with political and social capital, money and influence – meet and commingle, and as a bridge between the two. One of a public gallery’s many roles is a social registrant and sanctioning agent. What Terada’s project has uncovered though is a hidden tax the gallery tithes itself for acting in this role of intermediary. While far from erasing the gallery’s role (he relies on it) Terada elides the gallery as middleman and floats his reputation directly on a market of public opinion, finding in effect that he is worth at least \$25,000 more than what the Contemporary Art Gallery had on offer. Thus credited, Terada is returning the favour in kind, giving the funders and sponsors validation they heretofore were denied – specifically their names on the gallery walls instead of in the entrance or lobby area.

In this light, it becomes apparent why Terada’s project on first glance is not “critical” within expected terms. The abilities of liberal capitalism to absorb



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and co-opt criticism – a vital ingredient to its ongoing perseverance – imparts to artworks that outwardly attack the market economy of which they are a part, no fundamental impediment to their entry into that very economy. Sometimes it can be helpful. Rather than adopt such a fundamentally compromised position, Terada has chosen instead to take a capitalist economy at face value, and has developed *Catalogue* in indulgent commiseration with the present status quo. His accomplishment would succeed on every level but for the fact the gallery still acts as intermediary between funders and artist. As the tax-receipt issuing organization responsible for accepting the donor's money and assigning it in turn to Terada, we still hold responsibility and authority over cutting the cheques. Perhaps if Terada truly aims for emancipation, and logically his art somehow points in this direction, the next artwork will be running an art gallery. In this case I can only warn Terada to be careful what he wishes for.

But it is back to the question of artistic integrity that Terada's artwork draws my argument. On the surface such questions are spoken in worry about whether artist's products are worth what buyers and sellers claim for them. The refrain "my kid could have done it" speaks to the fear artistic output casts upon a capitalist system: that art which relies on intellectual rigour and has no outward evidence as craft can too easily disguise the fact it is nothing more than disinvested and exploitive trickery. In this view artists are either driven by some inner compulsion or they're in it for the money. Yet while it is common and accepted (in fact virtuous) to affect greed in many fields of endeavor, cultural occupations are consistently held in special reserve and placed

within a different moral perspective. There is clearly a need to buttress the belief that labour in everyday economies holds some fundamental difference to intellectual and cultural (read humanitarian) efforts; that *capitalism* doesn't impinge on the production of *art*. But it does, and *Catalogue* might point to how much more fearful, and potentially revolutionary it might be if artists choose to fully exploit their role as emancipated capitalists.

1 Michael Asher, *Writings 1973–1983 on works 1969–1979*, ed. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (Halifax, N.S.: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1993): 70.

2 Art & Language (Michael Baldwin, Charles Harrison, Mel Ramsden), "Manet's Olympia and Contradiction" (Apropos T.J. Clark and Peter Wollen's Recent Articles), *Mannerism: A Theory of Culture* ed. Jo-Anne Birnie Dansker (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1982): 24.

