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SITTING IN THE SUN OF MY ATTENTION FOR A SPAN

PROCESS AS WORK

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When considering an artist's "process," it is easy to slip into generalizations. The generalization that reigns true, however, is that the artistic process is subjective: it is an experience that is unique and distinctive to each artist. In response to the exhibition, *Process as Work*, while battling with and reflecting upon my own writing process, I have chosen to incorporate as many of the artist's working ideas as possible. For most of the artists in this exhibition, writing is a central element of their practice. There is a long history of artists contributing to intellectual discourse through writing on their own work and that of others in Vancouver—this is certainly the case for Roy Kiyooka, Damian Moppett, Jerry Pethick, and Ian Wallace.

While I am admittedly influencing this content with my own subjective selections by choosing insights that I think are relevant, I would like to allow the artists to speak for themselves. In contradistinction to the utopian notion of the "authentic" voice, I am thinking here of Roland Barthes' position on literary criticism as a meta-language, in which he asks, "are there laws of creation valid for the writer but not for the critic? All criticism must include in its discourse (even if it is in the most indirect and modest manner imaginable) an implicit reflection on itself; every criticism is a criticism of the work *and* a criticism of itself."¹ I would argue that the processes revealed in the artists' writing and the works in this exhibition are implicitly self-critical, enforcing a kind of self-inflicted law that shapes and defines their practice.

Process as Work was organized in part as an opportunity to present entire series or bodies of work that have rarely been shown in complete groupings before and to foreground artists for whom *process* is the work itself. The exhibition brings into question the idea of the endgame wherein the final object and the process of making coalesce, allowing us to see the results of a commitment

to a practice over time. The working practices of Kiyooka, Moppett, Pethick, and Wallace have consistently involved the production of serial works that explore the limits and possibilities of an idea, often through the use of multiples or the repetition of motifs. These projects are not considered studies in the traditional sense: they are developed over years and gathered as claimed bodies of work. The object(s) produced as a result of this production are not, however, claimed only in their singularity and do not represent the endgame, but, rather, a continuum.

In the 1970s, Roy Kiyooka made a clear break from his solitary studio practice (in the tradition of modernist sculpture and painting) to pursue his interest in new forms of social sculpture through writing, photography, and new media. This shift in Kiyooka's process indelibly informed his work from then on. He frequently presented videos and photo-graphs as malleable filmstrips or a series of snapshots from the roll, revealing the making of the work within the work. The photographs and videos included in this exhibition form a sequential collage that speak to the collective experience of filming with his students in northern British Columbia and to Kiyooka's exploration of photography's stillness in relation to film. The recurrence of his face as a mask haunts the works as Kiyooka literally tries on different forms. He explains that it is this shift to new media and the form itself that guided his post-1960s practice:

The dilemma that I've come to in terms of art is simply that I no longer know the form of anything. There isn't a form, a container, a structure, per se, that is given, that has been given to me, incrementally through all of the past, that at this moment I can say of, "I'm going to use that as the form of what I'm going to do." In that sense I've come to a most curious place, and that is: everything I'm going to make will have to find its form.²

In a transcribed interview in the accompanying catalogue for Kiyooka's 1975 touring exhibition, *Roy Kiyooka: 25 Years*, organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery, curator Christopher Varley asked Kiyooka to reflect upon his art practice over the years and explain his "imperative to change." According to the artist,

It had to do with the host-of-images I came across and thought, "Wow! That's something I'll have to take into account." And the only way I could do this was to *paint*, paint my way through them. I think it was Apollinaire who said apropos to the Cubists, that you carry your father (tradition) around on your back, but sooner or later you've got to let him off and walk away, even as you bless him. That sense of it. Which includes an ongoing curiosity about materials, medias, and processes of divination.³

In his shift to photography, Kiyooka integrated the world around him by attending to the materiality of the photograph. He frequently overlapped images through double-exposure and presented his photographs as series rather than as a one penultimate image or object. Kiyooka explained his move to photography and writing in this way:

Since summer '69 I've taken lots of photographs, I've always tended to work in "series" and my photographs do that. It's usually 20 to 36 exposures of whatever grabbed my attention—the slice of landscape, a face, rock or tree, their mutabilities [...]. I love the quickness of photography, how it enables one to move through the world "alert" to its poignancies.⁴

He went on to state that:

I'm a child of Radio, one of those who sat beside the RCA Victor's spotted dog with cockt ear, listening

to his master's voice. Even today, I prefer listening to radio to watching television. There's Radio's many voices and there's literature's myriad voice and no matter who is doing the talking, there's the pleasure of putting a face on the words. Call it inter-face. Painting gave me a face; writing, a voice, but it's not a matter of choosing. It's more like fate. Otherwise, my writings, hopefully, say it.⁵

These reflections came to Kiyooka amidst his twenty-five year retrospective. It is interesting to consider, then, the way in which these perspectives change or hold true throughout an artist's career. You can see how, for instance, the continuum of ideas that surface in Jerry Pethick's early two-dimensional drawing/collage works from the 1960s remained at the core of his investigations throughout his practice. Musing on the creative process in general in an essay from 1977, Pethick's early interest in producing art that is born from a curiosity in all fields rather than a specialized language is evident:

There is in creative expression a compulsion to manipulate the universe, if only for an instant, into a sensual unity that encompasses the organizer and the timeless observer. Artists continue to search for a reality and an integrated way of expressing that small and refined kernel of experience/unity that is the emotive force of incidental communication leading to what we perceive as an endless array of expression. If this activity undergoes evolutionary change, then there is no method other than experience to relate the dissimilarity. By our need to document and specialize (wall of similarity) we have managed to exclude ourselves both from the natural evolution of spatial precedence and the developing senses, whose growth is essential to discern the difference in our own continuum. Fluctuation of the creative

process, which is strong because it is erratic, is perceptible only within its natural flow. Art and media are capable of creating a thought process that adheres to *the idea* of all rational being. But the personal and experience-impregnated vision is not categorical, because it is not rational and it is actual.⁶

An open visual language remained constant in Pethick's oeuvre. It is likely the innovative quality of his collages from the 1960s that frequently cause them to be mistaken as contemporary. In these works, the first formation of the "array" emerges in the intersection motif, which reoccurs in the form of an "X" made with yellow, green, and red electrical tape. Between 1970 and 1972, Pethick made the wall array titled *Intersection* with the same tape, creating the optical effect of false perspective through the use of increasingly smaller bits of the tape. He described the work as "an object made with a skin of coloured vinyl tape and exaggerated perspective."⁷ If you look closely through the lenses that are backlit by a television set in Pethick's *Floating Free* (1972–1993), also in *Process as Work*, you can see the image of this intersection re-appear yet again.

In *Margaret, Yana, and the Century Plant* (1972–1988) Pethick stacked hexagonal Fresnel lenses to create a fly's eye view, where multiple images join to create the composite image. He created his own multi-lens pinhole camera in 1988 (characteristically constructed with reclaimed materials such as wood, felt, a game board, glass, and plastic pipe) and reflected upon his current work in an essay for *The Capilano Review*, where he conveys his enduring interest in perspective and the notion of space, noting the synthesis of these ideas for the first time in the photographic array:

What I think I'm doing remains somewhat constant, but the emphasis as well as the means changes all the time. Certain details of the whole picture are heightened, like sitting in the sun of my attention for a span. Now the autonomy of space as an entity is in rapport with tangibility and density; but earlier capsulated attempts tended to be looking for a structure that would allow the fragmentary elements to cohere as a composite. A unifying search that would revert to a linear portrayal, like the wire in barbed wire, the fragments sharp and separate refusing to find their niche, but at best being strung along a line (washing line, Gordian knot, or spaghetti strands), with nodes of periodic clarity. (This structured perception was entirely outside me, the facets of content gleaned from within; frustrating separation started to transform itself slowly when I became interested in intersecting lines.) [...]. My current work is trying to relate aspects of image and volume of deep illusory space, presently landscape space, to the presence of tangible sculptural elements. These elements exist in proximity to the volume of the integral photo array.⁸

Like his work, which interrupts fixed notions of time and space, Pethick himself seemed to exist in a "timeless" space as an inventor who was in constant dialogue with thinkers throughout various historical periods. Representing the youngest practice in *Process as Work*, Damian Moppett similarly seems to inhabit a kind of "Renaissance man" persona (but not without self-reflexivity or clear intent) as a means to deal with the burden of art history. Moppett's work also traverses a multitude of mediums as well as historical and personal references, one building on the next, as evidenced in the accumulative and ongoing drawing and watercolour project and related sculpture in this exhibition. In this project, Moppett's working process is similar to that constituting Ian Wallace's *New York*

Series Studies (1993-2003), (a grouping that occupies an entire room in this exhibition) wherein the group of works expands the life of the individual drawing.

Moppett's 2003 video *1815/1962*, in which he performs as a trapper who builds an animal trap resembling Anthony Caro's sculpture, *Early One Morning* (1962), succinctly captures his interest in mixing histories and forms. This work finally culminates in his most recent major sculptural project titled *Studio At Dawn* (2009), which is an oversized reproduction of Caro's sculpture produced in white enameled steel and oddly interrupted by a series of rustic ceramic pots that have been placed on its surface.

In a 2008 conversation with Sharla Sava in *The Capilano Review*, Moppett acknowledges his myriad influences:

I'm a compulsive catalogue buyer. Through reading about specific artists I get turned on to others. It is cumulative. I will look at Robert Grosvenor, and get turned on to Tony Smith, and then I'll get turned on to Frederick Kiesler, it goes on like that. My desire is to make those references clear in my work. In my first series of photographs, *The Office* photos, I was inspired by Oscar Niemeyer's architectural drawings, but you would never have known that, as viewer. A few years ago I started a series of watercolours and drawings, in order to make a lot of the obscure invisible references and inspirations visible. Not always understandable, but at least visible. There are images of my artistic influences, and also autobiographical images—an image of a concert, a book cover, places I've been—which are probably the most obscure for the viewer. It's kind of difficult being able to decipher what a picture of a trailer on Denman Island is saying in relation to my work. I hope this series will give the viewer a cumulative understanding of where I've been and where I'm going.⁹

Pointing to the way that Moppett makes his presence as the artist (or at times, amateur) visible in his work, Sava asks, "Is it fair to say that one of your artistic motivations has to do with artistic process, with how to make art?" Moppett responds, "That's always been an interest of mine. Everything that I've done, since my first series of photographs, has been in some way about the process of making."¹⁰

He also admits to his own "romantic and deeply modernist leanings."¹¹ Embracing part Renaissance man and part Modernist recluse, this process of making is intrinsically tied to Moppett's studio:

I guess the studio is the art. It's the thing that I am inspired by. The studio is the place where I interact with what I've made, and the place where I learn. I feel like there would be no point in making something if you are not learning from it, and I really learn more from my work in the studio than I do in the exhibition context [...]. First and foremost the studio symbolizes the creation of the work."¹²

In this current retrospective moment for Ian Wallace, decades of production are being mapped out through major curatorial projects and catalogues, marking where the persistence of his ideas and forms coalesce. Wallace has identified his early monochromes, which began in 1967, as the springboard of all his work since.¹³ Throughout his work from the 1970s on, we see the interplay between the pictorial and the absence of the pictorial. This was achieved for the first time as photolaminate canvases in *Poverty* (1980), a process that was driven in part by the emergence of a technology that could achieve large format printing in this way. In the body of work brought together in this exhibition, Wallace's methodical and serial way of working with the monochrome and the image over the course of many years becomes clear. Among the artists discussed here, Wallace is also one

of the most prolific writers on his own work, consistently trying to understand the lineage of his own process through the merging of the intellectual and the visual. The plethora of texts to choose from is endless. Like Moppett, the studio—or the idea of the studio—figures prominently in Wallace’s work. In a 1995 artist statement, produced a couple years after the first *New York Series Studies* work was made, Wallace explains:

The image of the studio has been a theme in my work for many years. It signifies for me a more intimate space of thinking as well as production; in contrast to the theme of the museum, which is the space of interface between the studio and public spectatorship; and the street, which conveys social content and everyday life.

My work is composed of two forms of material: intellectual material such as books, diaries, sketches, and maquettes and studio apparatus such as tools, furniture, canvas, paint, and photos. These materials signify respectively the conceptual and physical aspects of my studio work. In the studio series these elements appear as a visual trace of my commitment to the necessary link between the intellectual and the manual, which in turn also refers to the relationship between content and form.¹⁴

While Wallace’s main studio exists in Vancouver, he is not bound to a specific working space. The studio also exists in the working space of the hotel room and the street. Since the 1970s, Wallace has explored the social theatre of urban intersections through the juxtaposition of the painted monochrome and photographs that focus on the meeting point of dynamic urban relations in the form of pedestrians, traffic, signage, and architecture. In *New York Series Studies*, Wallace situates the history of the jazz scene in New York on the Broadway Boogie Woogie strip

while recalling the minimalism of Piet Mondrian. In what Wallace has termed a practice of “melancholic modernism,” there is a tension between the everyday scenes of the photograph and the absence of referential subject in the monochrome, wherein the white lines of the crosswalk and the painted canvas interact as real and abstract space. In a recent interview, Wallace states:

In my opinion, art can be made anywhere, under any conditions, studio or no studio [...]. I am interested in the “work” aspect of the work of art as well as the purely conceptual “art” aspect. I have a series titled *At Work* showing me at work in the studio. Ironically, in these images I am actually doing more “thinking” than “working.” But thinking is also “work,” is it not? Joking aside, I also still feel that the work of art in its most complete formation needs what I call the “material practice” of objectifying the concept in real materials through real technical processes. I am interested in the kinds of meanings that surface when concepts come into conflict with technique and the limits of the materials. I think that the concept of “production” in the material sense is as important as “representation” in the intellectual sense. It is through the resonance and the resistance of materials that the concept becomes open to the responses of the spectator, it gives an opening to interpretations of the art concept from other eyes than the artist alone. And it is in the space of the studio that the drama between materials and concept takes place. When I travel, my hotel room becomes a kind of peripatetic studio where I read and do small monochrome drawings, which are meaningless in themselves, but which ground my most abstract thoughts in the materiality of the paper. I photograph this space, usually just a small table by a window, as a material document of the abstractness of this practice, then make a canvas work from it.¹⁵

As these artists discussed above have attempted to capture the “essence” of what it is that they are doing through their writing and interviews, they each point to a constant pursuit for a form that speaks to content. The search for a means to communicate ideas exists in the dedication to a form often established through repetition and variation. This practice involves wringing out every possible combination of idea and material while maintaining a “fluctuation of the creative process,” which, as Pethick notes, “is strong because it is erratic.”¹⁶ This fluctuation is implicitly self-reflexive and critical, a discovery in the making of the work which is the building of the practice. It is all too often that the prescribed space of the exhibition is detached from the working space of the studio. While the selection of works in *Process as Work* remains, like my selection of texts here, only a part of the greater production, these groupings of serial and process-based projects remind us of the necessarily processual underpinnings of artistic output.

NOTES

1. Roland Barthes, “What Is Criticism?” in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 249.
2. Quoted in Gerry Gilbert, “Laughter: Five Conversations with Roy Kiyooka,” *Artscanada* 23 (4) (Winter 1975-1976): 12.
3. Christopher Varley, “Interview with Roy Kiyooka,” *Roy Kiyooka: 25 Years* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery, 1975), 9.
4. *Ibid.*, 9.
5. *Ibid.*, 11.
6. Jerry Pethick, “Bias Arrays: Un Procès Sans Cesse,” *Crosscurrents Vanguard* (December 1976 to January 1977): 3–4.
7. Quoted from a 1970 selection of the artist’s notes on file at Catriona Jeffries Gallery.
8. Jerry Pethick, “Visions in the Blood,” *The Capilano Review* (1) (Fall 1989): 99–100, and 102.
9. See Sharla Sava, “In the Studio with Damian Moppett,” *The Capilano Review* 3 (6) (Fall 2008): 49.
10. *Ibid.*, 49.
11. *Ibid.*, 50.
12. *Ibid.*, 50 and 54.
13. Ian Wallace, “The Monochromes of 1967 to 1968 and After,” *CJ Press: Anthology of Exhibition Essays 2006/2007* (Vancouver: CJ Press, 2008), 82.
14. Ian Wallace, “In The Studio Series,” *Press Release* (Vancouver: Catriona Jeffries Gallery, 1995).
15. Gigiotto Del Vecchio, “The Pictorial,” *Mousse* 21 (November–December 2009): 147.
16. Jerry Pethick, “Bias Arrays: Un Procès Sans Cesse,” 3–4.