

James Carl's Euphemistic Reality

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like to say, please do us a favor and take it away."² The debate and subsequent trial became confused — issues of caring, responsiveness were thrown out the window as different interest groups clamoured to protect or dismantle the piece. — Serra lost. In a caustic comment on one of Serra's prop pieces — which as well as looking dangerous, actually killed one workman and injured others, Montreal-based artist James Carl created a work titled *Qué Serra* (1990). He simply propped a cardboard box on top of a cardboard tube-cylinder in the corner of his studio. The same minimalist notions and architectural relations were established in microcosm, yet were — rendered harmless,

became a humorous parody of the extra-human expectations and desires of the artist who seeks to fulfill the obligations of the West's formalist tradition — its self-evident materialist ethos. The piece raised questions about the artist's freedom (in the modernist sense), where the artist dominates in opposing domination, confronts in reaction to confrontation, reduces empathy to a whimper to the exclusion of the public at large, who are as remote from public art as they are from the politicians who sponsor these projects. — The codes and signifiers of our post-modern paradigm are so pervasive that they create a web where the real and the artificial meaning of art and life become intertwined — and confused, just as they have become in all areas of life.

In a solo show, titled *Border Patterns*, at the Central Academy of Fine Art — in Beijing, China in 1990, James Carl assembled a group of works that expressed a different state of confusion — an intercultural one — far from the West's hue and cry over formalism. — With the ghosts of the Tian-an-men Square Massacre of 1989, Carl presented a foreigner's view of the cultural situation in Beijing, of an emergent consumerist ethic, among other things. The demands for products and services was becoming a part of the new spirit of communism in China. Objects found by Carl in Beijing markets were assembled within architectural and artifact constructions made of chop-sticks that echoed local architectural traditions. Despite the adverse conditions and political chill in the air his show was well

James Carl
Galerie Clark, Montreal
Nov. 19th - Dec. 13th, 1992

An artwork is not just a signpost to be grafted onto the walls of some museum's warehouse of tautologies sometime in the future. Nor is it just something to fill a servile place in a public space allotted by — city planners and architects to assuage nagging doubts about the wholesale disruption and dislocation of the city as a community. It is a reflection of a far less grand and self-assured search for meaning. The latter was made explicit in the controversy surrounding the removal of Richard Serra's monumental *Tilted Arc* — sculpture — from Federal Plaza in downtown Manhattan. Installed in 1981, it had been commissioned by the General Services Administration in 1979. This 120 ft. long, 12 ft. high, 73-ton leaning curve of welded steel was the epitomé of modernism. Inflexible, unwieldy, it dominated the public space like a spectre, heroic, confrontational — the very model of social independence, the ego's eye — modernity personified. For the local office workers, it was, in Suzi Gablik's words, "another version of the Berlin Wall"¹ and, as one employee of the Federal Department of Education stated, "It has dampened our spirits every day. It has turned into a hulk of rusty steel and clearly, at least to us, it doesn't have any appeal. It might have artistic value but just not here... and for those of us at the Plaza I would

James Carl, Site installation
outside Galerie Clark, Montreal,
Dec. 1992. Photo: Éric Dumont.

received, probably because he approached his subject with a sense of humour and some understanding of Chinese attitudes and philosophies about art. "While living abroad, one's aesthetic faculties are naturally exercised in confrontation with new art forms and architectures; yet these same faculties are also instrumental in such simple decisions as the purchase of such common items as toothpaste or batteries..."³ In *Rear-guard*, a ping-pong paddle resting neatly on top of a globe of the world in miniature became a loosely orchestrated comment on the two-sided face of Ping-Pong diplomacy. While abroad business was halted for a short while — to then resume as usual — within China the intelligentsia, university scholars, poets and artists were being silenced and imprisoned. Surrounding this innocent construction was a form made up of a continuous series of black and red chopsticks assembled into the shape of a tri-pedal Shang dynasty (1766-1028 B.C.) ritual vessel. Intended to highlight the mysteries of ancient Chinese art of bronze cast vessels,

whose deep relief and casting techniques excel anything created in the history of Western sculpture, the piece had the benign charm of a Time Magazine cover illustration. But Carl's parody of the international media-generated image of China versus the internal realities of life in China could not be missed. Likewise *Encore* (1989-90), a sound-activated installation piece, where the latest in toy technology — a replica of a giant panda — sat ignominiously on a red platform surrounded by a construction comprising 2,000 disposable chopsticks, an architecture of self-defense, welded together with a glue gun. With a clap of the viewer's hands, the battery operated panda clapped its hands, made a squeaking noise, its eyes lit up — and it moved in a disturbing robotic fashion like the toys in a Duracell commercial.

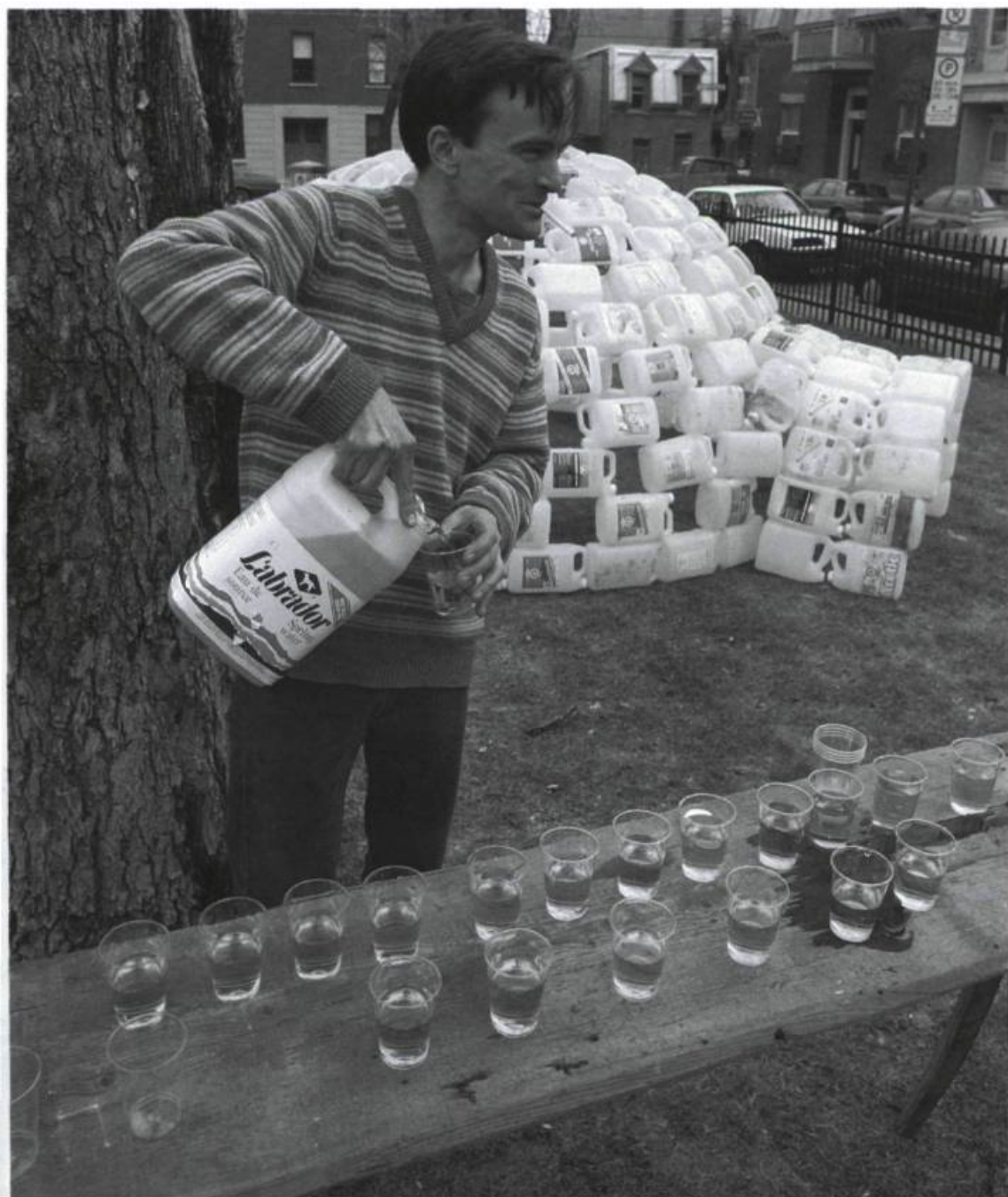
Soon after returning to Montreal in 1990, James Carl presented an ongoing exhibition at his studio on St. Laurent Boulevard that embodied the influences of his stay in China. *The 5 Elements* (1990-1991) was a

transitional work that interpreted the 5 elements theory of ancient Chinese cosmology: earth, fire, water, air, and wood. — Presented on altar-like pedestals, these assemblage constructions made of a vast range of consumer and found materials had their constituent elements moved around each day to suggest the sense of constant change and ritualistic immolation that the Chinese vision prescribes as part of the mutual dependencies which exist between all elements, an interconnected continuity and atomized particularization of nature's elements. — Air was represented by an aerosol can and coffee filter, Fire — by an Oxford English dictionary, Water by a freezer ice pack, ...etc.

For the Strathearn Centre's *Les Jardins Imprévis* — show in the summer of 1991, an inter-active group show dedicated to nature in the city, James — Carl made a site specific installation at the spaghetti-like traffic intersection of Pine and Park avenues. Comprising — a set of headphones installed in a metal box which visitors were invited to wear to block out the background noise of traffic, Carl's work, titled *Les Paumes de Terre*, commented on the curves and shapes of the roadway patterns themselves which resembled the lines a fortune teller might read in one's hand — the element of chance — luck — an eastern parable on Western determinist notions of progress and opportunity. It also suggested that the role of the artist is to intervene — to go between the standard thinking of a culture — its *modus vivendi* and *raison d'être*, and to suggest alternative ways of seeing — a counter-vision. Our standard spatial and temporal reading of the environmental surrounds slowed down, — a "moment of re-evaluation" was realized. Each evening, the box was locked and each morning the box was opened by Carl, in a parody of the work-a-day world. The to and fro, the hustle and bustle of traffic apparently going somewhere, but from this vantage point seeming to go nowhere, was mirrored by the purposeless method of Carl's routine of opening and closing the installation like a jailor. James Carl's piece demonstrated what the performance artist Allan Kaprow, in an essay titled *The Real Experiment*, has called "life-like" art, where art remains connected to everything else, as opposed to "artlike" art, which remains separate from life and everything else.⁴ As the latter performs a function in relation to mainstream Western historical traditions because art galleries, journals, museums and professionals need artists whose art is "artlike", so "lifelike" art

remains outside these traditions and performs a more generic social and ethno-

James Carl, *Spring Collection*, (Igloo = 5' x 11'), Parc portugais — Marie-anne & St. Laurent, Montreal, Spring 1991.





dehumanized work in an age of mass production. Carl's attitudes to the role of the artist in the creative process recalled Walter de Maria's "Meaningless Work" manifesto of 1960 wherein he wrote, "Meaningless work is potentially the most (...) important art-action experience one can undertake today."⁵ As such Carl's installation show became a place where East met West. Henry Ford meets Gautama Buddha somewhere between the product assembly line and the recycling depot. The work became a deep felt comment on the meaning of culture seen from two philosophical points of view: that of the 3rd world vision — religiously astute in a state of being consumed, and that of the West — overloaded with the products of materialism and spiritually vacuous. E.F. Schumacher in *Small is Beautiful* — comments on the Asian Buddhist view of work, one that is presently being challenged throughout Asia by an emergent consumerism and loss of permanence: "The Buddhist point of view takes the function of work to be at least threefold: to give a man a chance to utilise and develop his faculties; to enable him to overcome his egocentredness by joining with other people in a common task; and to bring forth the goods and services needed for a becoming existence... the consequences that flow from this view are endless. To organise work in such a manner that it becomes meaningless, boring, stultifying, or nerve-wracking for the worker would be nothing short of criminal; it would indicate a greater concern with goods than with people... Equally, to strive for leisure as an alternative to work would be considered a complete misunderstanding of one of the basic truths of human existence, namely that work and leisure are complementary parts of the same living process and cannot be separated without destroying the joy of work and the bliss of leisure."⁶ Seen within the context of the creation of art, the same applies, yet Carl has taken this one step further. Each week, during the installation, he placed several of these "appliances" out in the garbage. Often they would "disappear" having been picked up by passers-by. These actions Carl recorded using a spy camera from a window above. Alternatively, they were taken to the garbage dump — another kind of "site" — thus bringing the process of production full circle. By not actually using real appliances and incorporating the element of work into the equation he broaches questions of meaning that are no longer standard to current art practice. It becomes a 3rd world comment on Western contemporary art done through the language of western materialism — objects made to appear like consumer items — but every bit as ephemeral, changing and short lived as the elements in nature. While their appearance and design is

logical function. — In the spring of that same year, at another location in Montreal (Parc Portugais at St. Laurent and Marie-Anne), Carl presented *Spring Collection*, a 5' x 11' igloo assembled out of discarded plastic containers — The supreme irony of this symbol of a northern human shelter against the cold was that its component "building block" parts were discarded anti-freeze containers left lying around on the streets after winter. As an inducement for the public to interact with the artist, he set up a table and served drinking water tinted with an attractive bright blue colouring that looked more like Prestone windshield wiper

fluid than Aquanature or Labrador "naturally pure" drinking water.

For his latest show at Galerie Clark, Carl

presented a myriad of consumer appliances — "disposable art" — that called into question art's position in the production-consumption chain. Meticulously pieced together out of cardboard in 1:1 scale, these constructions were indeed "lifelike" reproductions of functional consumer objects. Fridges, stoves, radios, record players, toasters, a television, washer and dryer littered the gallery space yet the process they engendered, the craft of construction and contemplation they entailed presented a mask of consumerism — the "artlike" design of the production assembly line. The care and time taken to make these pieces, which usually were constructed from the discarded containers of exactly the product they represented — in fact a kind of creative employment — albeit without consumer value — was a comment on the value placed on

James Carl, *The 5 Elements. (Air & Fire)* 1990-91. Multi media assemblage. Studio show, Blvd. St. Laurent, Montreal, 1991.



made to seem structural, it is a facade, a mask of what it is. The whole question of appearance — beauty in art becomes a side issue. James Carl mimics the production process to suggest a different sense of self and community, — one that is at once timely and coherent, but ultimately humorous and poetic. ◆

1. Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*, (London ; Thames & Hudson, 1991), p. 63.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
3. James Carl cited in *Meditations at the Foot of the Great Wall*, Ming Pao yue kan, Hong Kong, May 1991.
4. Allan Kaprow, *Assemblages, Environments & Happenings*, (New York ; Abrams, 1966).
5. Walter de Maria cited in *The Reenchantment of Art*, pp. 135-136.
6. E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful ; A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*, (London ; Abacus, 1977), p.45.

James Carl, *Les Paumes de Terre*, (Les Jardins Imprévus), Summer 1991. Site specific installation, Pine & Park Avenues, Montreal.

L'artiste montréalais, James Carl, parodie les attentes et les obligations "surhumaines" de la tradition formaliste occidentale ainsi que son caractère matérialiste pour mieux nous faire saisir que la fonction de l'art est aussi éphémère, temporelle et changeante que la vie elle-même.

L'exposition, *Border Patterns*, présentée en 1990 au Central Academy of Fine Arts de Beijing, donnait à voir une suite d'œuvres qui représentait la réponse d'un étranger aux différentes attitudes et approches philosophiques chinoises face à l'art. Ces œuvres, réalisées à partir de baguettes chinoises collées ensemble, étaient des constructions "pseudo-architecturales" pouvant inclure des objets aussi variés qu'un panda activé par des ondes sonores, ou encore une palette de ping-pong posée sur un globe miniaturisé (symbolisant la nature dualiste de la diplomatie chinoise). *Border Patterns* — ironisait sur les oppositions qui peuvent exister entre la propagande chinoise internationale, conçue pour l'Ouest dans les

médias, et la réalité quotidienne de ce pays.

Récemment, l'artiste présentait une installation à la Galerie Clark, faite d'un ensemble de fac-similés d'appareils ménagers — réfrigérateurs, cuisinières, radios, téléviseurs, grille-pain, laveuses, sècheuses — souvent exécutés à partir des emballages originels des appareils. L'ensemble instaure un lieu où l'Orient et l'Occident se rencontrent, où Henry Ford croise Gautama Bouddha, un espace intermédiaire entre la chaîne de montage et le dépôt de recyclage.

Chaque semaine, tout au long de l'exposition, James Carl déposait sur le trottoir plusieurs de ces "appareils". Passants et éboueurs les récupéraient pendant que l'artiste captait les mouvements avec une caméra invisible. Le choix de ne pas utiliser de véritables appareils ménagers, allié à la notion de travail intégré au cheminement artistique, amène cette parodie à suggérer une nouvelle perception de soi et de la société. Une perception pertinente et cohérente mais aussi humoristique et poétique.