

GILLIAN COLLYER  
MARLA HLADY  
RHONDA WEPPLE &  
TREVOR MAHOVSKY



OWENS ART GALLERY

Such failures were, however, his human opportunity; they marked the point where mechanical efficiency yielded to life itself.<sup>1</sup>

# SPINNING WHEELS

Those of us who are superstitious believe that even the most mundane events of daily life are the effect of some secret, perhaps celestial plan. We suspect that our habits, the bare repetitions of which we carry out at the worst of times almost mechanically, conceal a more profound type of "machination." The superficial uneasiness, amusement or annoyance that we may feel when confronted with any unusually sudden or unexpected break in routine issues from this more profound sense of repetition. On the other side of these accidents, both incident and incidental, we imagine either fate conspiring or mere arbitrariness. Whatever our rationalization, it can be difficult at times not to be "put on edge" by even the most subtle accumulation of coincidence.

There is something fundamentally disturbing about dull repetition in a work of art. Although we easily accept a high level of it in our daily lives – structured as they are according to habit, routine, consumerism, social expectations, the media and so forth – the more repetitive or programmatic a work of art, the more we tend to consider it extreme or perverse. Andy Warhol is, perhaps, the most famous example of this, but the same may comfortably be said of most avant-garde movements, from the “word salads” of Dadaism to the strange accretions of post-minimal art.

Repetition is obviously important to the art of Marla Hlady, Gillian Collyer, Rhonda Wepler and Trevor Mahovsky. Reviews and explanations of their work affirm its repetitious nature consistently through reference to domestic habit, mass-production, consumer packaging, social rules, formulas, codes, systems and so forth. Indeed, the work of all four artists relates directly to a variety of banal routines, such as shopping, sewing, driving and entertainment, habits that reinforce our everyday lives and perhaps give us the comforting illusion of purpose. And yet, within each of their distinct practices the same comfortable repetition also finds itself transformed, as it occasionally does in life, through some unexpected event, contingency, or coincident, some bump in the road or slip of the hand. In a work of art, dull, consistent repetition insinuates both hidden meaning and meaninglessness; it implies both ritual and nihilism. The tension this creates gives way to a vague, at times profound sense of heterogeneous force.

The immanence of “giving way” is what disturbs us, like an inconsistency or failure in the very concept of habit or system. Chaos murmurs through an opening, a break or imperfection in the rhythm,

and gives us a feeling of uneasiness or palpitation, “an encroaching discomfort, a subtle but creeping sense of menace that makes the little hairs on the back of your neck stand to alertness.”<sup>2</sup> Some people claim that it is just silly to say that such art is disturbing, but they are no less disturbed when they say it. Repetitious art “connects the tableau of cruelty with that of stupidity.”<sup>3</sup> As such, it will always be a matter of foolishness and fear. In it, we will always hear “giggly, delirious squeals of delight” and references to abuse.<sup>4</sup>

## one

The working systems that Marla Hlady imagines are at once certain and profoundly unstable. Although they usually function according to some predetermined, relentlessly repetitive program, they are, in fact, without any productive function at all. The objects that perform her invented routines often appear “naked,” as if their purpose had been ripped from them like clothing or skin, leaving them in a state of spasm, grasping incessantly after whatever function they may have once embraced; the only function they will ever hold.

The German philosopher, Theodor W. Adorno, once wrote elliptically, “the function of art in a totally functional world is its functionlessness.”<sup>5</sup> An analogy could easily be made between this circuitous observation and the cyclical workings of Hlady’s sculptures. Made from the innards of found mechanical objects, such as mass-produced toys, accompanied by self-engendered noise or loops of found music, they aimlessly spin, squawk, jiggle or whirl out their habitual movements when prompted, sometimes by motion detectors or the press of a button. Robbed of their original identity and purpose, their motions create a paradoxical affect, a tension between the sense

of amusement habitually associated with toys, and the sense of cruelty inspired by the incessant, spasmodic activity in which they seem trapped. The feeling Hlady's work engenders is thus both pleasant and unpleasant, that of a "wacky laboratory-cum-sound studio in which you feel like a chance intruder, at once intrigued, repelled and amused by the goings-on."<sup>6</sup>

It has been noted by more than one observer that this work raises "questions about continuity and discord within a prescribed and limited system."<sup>7</sup> The overarching inclination in this case is to metaphorically align the systems Hlady explores with the mundane, seemingly inescapable repetition of contemporary, consumer society. To this end, Barbara Fischer writes that "the structure and elements of Marla Hlady's works invite comparison to social systems," an invitation linked to our tendency to anthropomorphize the mechanical figures her work employs.<sup>8</sup> This observation is not entirely misplaced, given that Hlady accepts the dictionary definition of a system as "the body considered as a functional unit and a group of devices or objects forming a network especially for distributing something or serving a common purpose." The majority of reviews and essays devoted to her work consider it in a similar light, making links between it and representations of the "Big machine of consumerism,"<sup>9</sup> the plight of "Romantic characters in a cruel world,"<sup>10</sup> or the living, breathing individual "at the mercy of a larger system, the entirety of which we cannot fully perceive or comprehend."<sup>11</sup>

According to this logic, one might easily read the monotonous nodding of the Chihuahua head in Hlady's video, *Electro-magnetic Chihuahua-nod Machine* (2002), as another representation of our tacit acquiescence to the banal patterns of consumerism. It might

thus be said to function as a symbol of our desire to be led and not to question, but also our inability to break out of this dictatorial routine. The video presents us with extended footage of one of those silly toys which sits in the back window of a moving car and records every swerve and bump in the road. Watching the back of its bobbing, blob-like head is both fascinating and repellent. One slowly becomes aware of an inexplicable, repetitious and disjointed clicking noise accompanying its movements. Slightly out of synch and context, this noise compounds the overriding feeling of uneasiness, as if its rhythm were the result of some unseen machination – something else going on. The banal gestures of the device thus give way to a brewing sense of corruption. There is a terrifying absurdity in the notion that this stupid toy might, in some incomprehensible way, be the vehicle of a system that includes us, but that we cannot fully grasp.

At the end of the video, however, both artifice and conspiracy are “given away.” The Chihuahua is revealed to be a hand-operated mechanism filmed in front of a pre-existing film shot from the back of a moving car. In an instant, it becomes apparent that the hand has been manipulating the device throughout the entire video with a slight, although no less avoidable delay, according to turns and bumps in the road that are intuited and not physically experienced. One is reminded of low budget, B-films in which images of the moving landscape are projected outside the windows of stationary cars, while the actors they contain pretend to drive. If the images themselves do not give the device away, the movement of the actors’ hands often will.

A paradox lies in the pleasure we derive from this “give away.” Although it allows the premise of the video to become clear and finally fall into place, it also engenders a sense of duplicity and distortion.

This oscillation, the movement between the synchronous and sensible and the out of synch and useless, is fundamental to Hlady's work. In this interval, improvisation becomes possible within a closed system. Marcel Duchamp once referred to this as "canned chance." The bumps in the road are, for instance, taken as a randomly generated program or musical score. Coordinating the hand with their indications is thus a matter of feeling, a rhythm that is guessed, that wanders accidentally, skips a beat, and never fully adds up. The principle or idea remains ordered and certain, but the results of the system seem inconsistent and out of place. The hand is very important to Hlady's work, because its contingency – that of human error, failure or the haphazard touch of gallery visitors – infects and puts at risk even the most rigorous systems or the most organized bodies. The vulnerability of her mechanical sculptures, implicit in the invitation or need to touch them, inspires more feeling than understanding. Their failure to serve a productive purpose is like an experience of blindness. Their wires trip as we fumble to understand them.

In the collaborative work, *The Only One My Arms Will Ever Hold (Blue Moon)* (2003), Hlady and composer, John Abram, have created an aural system that also moves perplexingly between composition and decomposition, fragmentation and conformity, discord and accord. The title of the piece, taken from Harold Arlen's song "Blue Moon," is at once fatal and arbitrary, implying both a certain destiny and a grasping sense of loss. Appearing as a ball of blue plasticine with small toy speakers inserted in its surface, *The Only One My Arms Will Ever Hold (Blue Moon)* is activated by viewers through the touch of a button. Its toy-like affinities are obvious, including its size and shape (that of a basketball), its constituent, seemingly hand-fashioned

material, the playful simile of song-title and the sculpture's physical form (Blue Moon), the pressing of buttons, and so forth. Composed of four electronically generated instruments – acoustic bass, vibraphone, piano and drums – and arranged in seven parts endlessly looped, the musical component of this work moves between the decomposition and dissolution of melody and the promise of realignment given by the gallery label. It reads: “When the black PLAY button is pressed, the seven parts begin playing in synch. As the parts loop, the melody's structure falls out of synch, only realigning after playing continuously for approximately one hour, OR if the STOP/RESET button is pressed.”

Most reviewers tend to read Hlady's work as a mere representation of our powerlessness within a larger social system, but it is also unexpectedly empowering. Although her installations are created according to prescribed, limited systems, they nonetheless open upon a future. This is not a teleological, means-end future furnished by some notion of a productive function or goal, but an experimental future, a future that remains unforeseen. Will the arrangement play out, realign, or be stopped by the capricious whim of any number of possible viewers? Abram created the musical arrangement for *The Only One My Arms Will Ever Hold (Blue Moon)* by selecting every 7<sup>th</sup> note of the chosen song, “regardless of which instrument that note belonged to.”<sup>12</sup> He then split them off from the other notes. By repeating this process six times, he derived seven “fairly interesting” fragmented parts from the original arrangement. He then worked out a scheme of repetitions and loop lengths that would allow the arrangement to realign every hour. He described the result as a “fragmented kind of free-improvisation which now and then resembles a tune you think you remember. Once in a blue moon you realize what the tune is.”<sup>13</sup> This is

an expression of chance, but it is a hopeful one, as if the circle that this process creates tended “on its own to open onto a future, as a function of the working forces it shelters.”<sup>14</sup>

It is also worthwhile comparing the glitch-like motions of Hlady’s sculptures to the spasm of thought before the impossible. Since her work is often described as “maddening and sublime,” this analogy has already been more or less insinuated. The sublime is a feeling prompted by the idea of the infinite, boundless or unpredictable. It is a bittersweet feeling, an exhilarating and useless spinning of thought’s wheels. It is both happy and unhappy, both sentimental and cruel. There is pleasure in the sublime, because the idea of infinity occurs, and there is also displeasure, because one cannot imagine it. There is comfort, because reason feels secure in its power of conception, and cruelty, because it also demands the impossible of imagination; an image to go with its idea. The sublime thus involves a supreme absurdity, for in it reason “goes mad” with a desire for an impossible image, a presentation of the infinite. It “abuses” imagination for this image, which in turn does nothing but make a series of imperfect, half-presentations: glitches.

The supreme absurdity is implied in Hlady’s sculptures. Especially if one considers that the word absurd indicates that which is irrational, but also that which is both deaf and insupportable to the ears. It is like “screaming as loud as you can scream.”<sup>15</sup> On a microcosmic level, Hlady’s sculptures demonstrate that the demands of reason (rational culture) for a final standard by which to measure our entire existence are not “great” – they are inane, absurd, and abusive. The boundless contingency that the future holds cannot be reduced to a finite pattern without something overflowing, escaping or mutating. Even the simple

systems of mass-produced, mechanical toys do not work out with perfect consistency. “Why does this little contraption squawk and jiggle, while that one jiggles, pauses, then squawks?”<sup>16</sup> Life’s inherent diversity thus comes at the price of a system failure. This is a negative kind of joy, a chance for laughter and release within a situation that is “by no means a joke.”<sup>17</sup>

#### Footnotes

- 1 Jean Cocteau, *Les enfants terribles*, trans. Rosamond Lehmann (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 99.
- 2 Jayne Wark, "Gillian Collyer: Second Skin," *hand-held* (Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia: ARTsPLACE, 2001).
- 3 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 293.
- 4 See Peter Dykuis, *Gillian Collyer: hand-held* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, 2000), and Robin Metcalfe, *Cozy* (London, Ontario: Museum London, 2001), p. 11.
- 5 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 320.
- 6 Gillian MacKay, "Marla Hlady at W.A.R.C.," *The Globe and Mail*, April 24, 1999.
- 7 Jack Anderson, "Hlady's installation an intriguing and provocative show," *The Leader Post*, Regina Saskatchewan, May 8, 2002.
- 8 Barbara Fischer, "Simulcast: Some observations about the experience of sound in Marla Hlady's work," *Marla Hlady* (Toronto: The Power Plant, 2001), p. 9.
- 9 Gillian MacKay, "Popular Mechanics," *The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, November 4, 2000.
- 10 Kia Kostanis, "Staying Power," *NOW Magazine*, Toronto, August 2, 2001.
- 11 John Massier, "Sound and Fury Signifying Something," *Beauty: A New Installation by Marla Hlady* (Toronto: Loggia Gallery, 1992).
- 12 John Abram, Artist statement, 2004.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 311.
- 15 Marla Hlady, quoted by Gillian MacKay, "Popular Mechanics."
- 16 Betty Ann Jordan, "Marla Hlady at Cold City" *The Globe and Mail*, April 18, 1998.
- 17 Marla Hlady, quoted by Gillian MacKay "Popular Mechanics."
- 18 Jayne Wark. "Gillian Collyer: Second Skin."
- 19 Robin Metcalfe, *Cozy*, p. 12.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 21 Anne Norton, *Bloodrites of the Post-Structuralists: Word, Flesh and Revolution* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 13.
- 22 Jayne Wark, "Gillian Collyer: Second Skin."
- 23 Liz Magor "Faint," *Thin: Rhonda Wepler* (Toronto: YYZ, 2002)
- 24 See Trevor Mahovsky, "Three thin texts to parallel an exhibition," *Stacked: Rhonda Wepler* (Calgary: The Stride Gallery, 2002).
- 25 Press Release, *Cerve: Rhonda Wepler and Michael Flaherty*, Eastern Edge, St. John's, NL, 2003.
- 26 Trevor Mahovsky, "Rhonda Wepler" (Ottawa: Gallery 101, 2001).
- 27 Magor, "Faint."
- 28 Mahovsky, "Three thin texts to parallel an exhibition."
- 29 Mahovsky, "Rhonda Wepler."
- 30 Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997), p. 52.
- 31 Mahovsky, "Rhonda Wepler."
- 32 Magor, "Faint."
- 33 Susan Stewart, *On longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 168.
- 34 Mahovsky, Artist Statement, 2004.
- 35 *Ibid.*
- 36 Magor, "Faint."
- 37 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London England: The MIT Press, 1997), p. 158.
- 38 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 45.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

## List of Works

Gillian Collyer

*Doilies* 2003

cast bronze

various dimensions

Rhonda Wepler and Trevor Mahovsky

*Carts* 2003

kitchen-grade aluminum foil

approximately 4'x 26" x 33" each

Marla Hlady

*Electro-magnetic Chihuahua-nod Machine* 2002

colour video

4 min. and 10 seconds, looped

Marla Hlady in collaboration with John Abram

*The Only One My Arms Will Ever Hold (Blue Moon)* 2003

plasticine, on/pause and off/reset switches, circuit board  
with analog audio chips, speakers

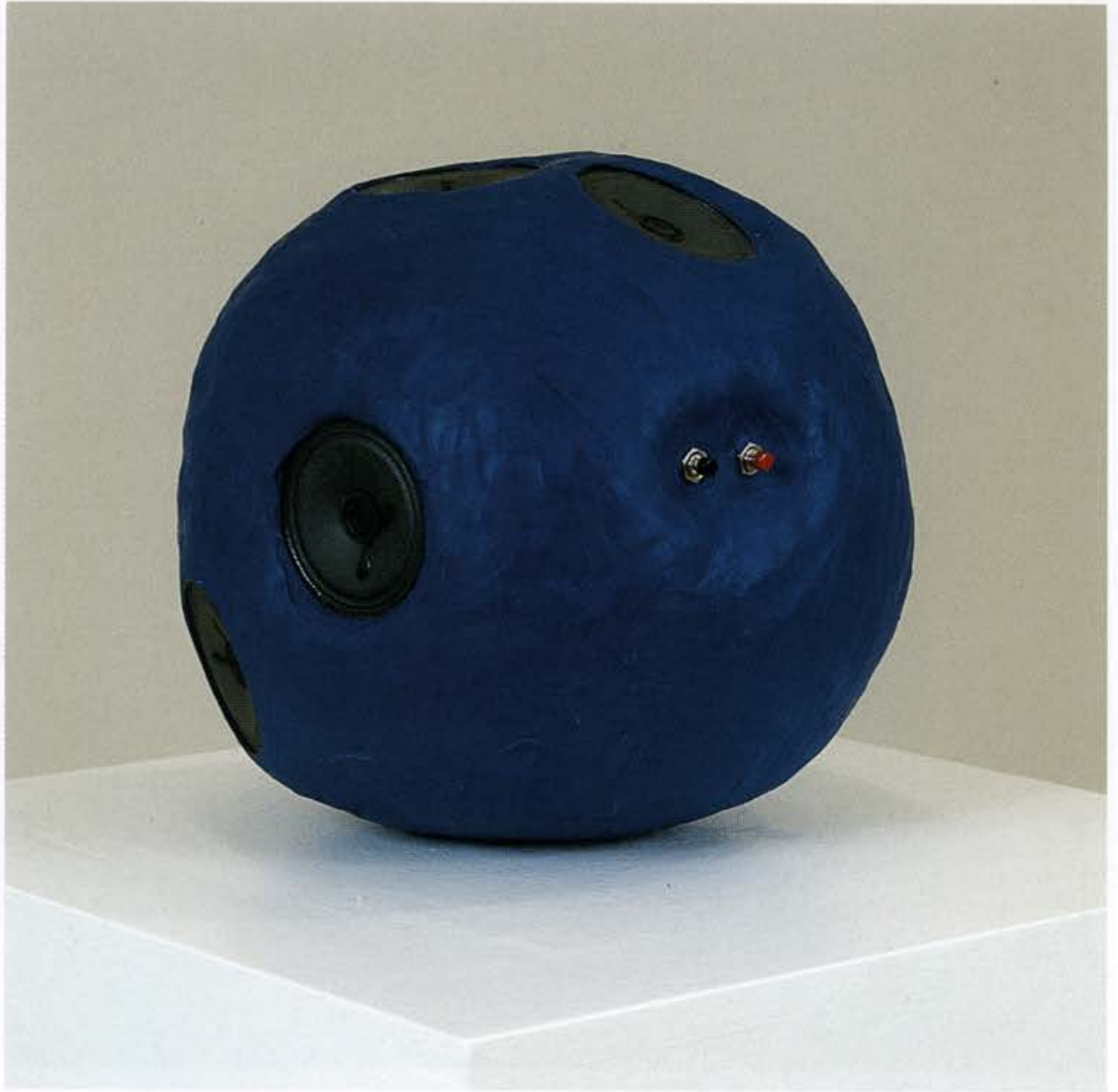
approximately 9.5" diameter



Marla Hlady, *Electro-magnetic Chihuahua-nod Machine* 2002



Production Still



Marla Hlady in collaboration with John Abram  
*The Only One My Arms Will Ever Hold (Blue Moon)* 2003

Gillian Collyer  
Marla Hlady  
Rhonda Wepler and Trevor  
Mahovsky

16 January to 29 February 2004

ISBN 0-88828-188-9  
"Spinning Wheels"  
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Owens Art Gallery

**Owens Art Gallery**  
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Sackville, New Brunswick  
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[www.mta.ca/owens](http://www.mta.ca/owens)

Photography: Steven Farmer  
Catalogue design:  
Semaphor Design Company  
Printing: Bounty Print



The Canada Council for the Arts  
Le Conseil des Arts du Canada

**Mount Allison**  
UNIVERSITY

## Afterword

This catalogue documents the work of Gillian Collyer, Marla Hlady, and Rhonda Wepler and Trevor Mahovsky, presented at the Owens Art Gallery in three concurrent exhibitions this year. I want to thank the artists sincerely for the important opportunity to bring them to Sackville to install their exhibitions and to interact with our community.

The catalogue also offers a meaningful context for their work through the writing of Emily Falvey in her essay "Spinning Wheels". Her involvement with the Owens as a guest-writer over the past several years has greatly extended our efforts to provide community dialogue and education in the arts, while making a significant contribution to the critical discourse on contemporary art in Canada.

I would also like to acknowledge with gratitude the funding assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts through its program of Assistance to Art Museums and Public Galleries, and Mount Allison University for its ongoing support of the Owens Art Gallery and its initiatives.

Gemey Kelly  
Director