

Flywheel flies

This is a good story.

I am on my way to the Flywheel opening at The Nunnery in London, England.

The Flywheel collective from Toronto is having its first exhibition; it's called Flywheel. I am on the Tube staring at the shoes of a woman sitting across from me. They're very ordinary shoes, but I am thinking about the moment she looked

at herself and the shoes in the mirror and thought "I must have them." I try to imagine the drama—the story. I often find mundane things captivating, mostly as signs of willfulness (me, Duchamp, Martin Creed, Sophie Calle...). These signs are evidence that the things we see have something to say, even when they *appear* mute.

I listen for intention. It's a type of synesthesia. I look to see but also to hear. If I cannot see the thrust of things then perhaps I can hear it, by looking at it. It's the experience of a thing that I am after—the desire for experience as a more profound and authentic relation than knowledge. I want to look at a thing and wonder. Even if I cannot know the provenance of ideas with any certainty, I at least want to be motivated to ask—questions are more generative, no matter how much we want answers. Good art speaks and though its speech is not easily graspable (hearing is more slippery than seeing and touching), it offers possibilities. The twentieth-century theorist Walter Benjamin claimed that the authority of the art object depends on the object's unknowability, on its being a sacred object rather than the object of "knowledge." He also maintained that what is essential is the art object's mystification. *I am curious about the woman's shoes, but not mystified by them.*

Art does not belong to the world of perfectly intelligible ideas (remember Plato). Good art will have us listen, however, and then it's a matter of faith. Benjamin's assertion may be a truism: good

by Eileen Sommerman



ABOVE: Flywheel exhibition invitation graphic
Invitation designed by Lewis Nicholson

LEFT: Marla Hlady
Untitled (from *Amusement*)



art is sacred because of its unknowability. The corollary is that an art object is important only if it is somewhat unknowable. I wonder at the way that art makes us reconsider *things*.

The Flywheel collective includes Lewis Nicholson, Michael Buchanan, Gwen MacGregor, Marla Hlady, Karen Henderson and Hugo Glendinning with Tim Etchells (the latter two are British-based). The collective came together like a tag team. It started with two artists (over a beer). They each chose someone whose work interested them, and so on and so on, until there were six. For a couple of years they met to talk. It was a meeting of like minds, an opportunity for dialogue among colleagues, artists, and eventually friends. They were patient

and without a rigid mandate or schedule. They were teetering between work and leisure: they talked about their work, and others' work, about art elsewhere, perhaps also about a glass ceiling in Toronto, and maybe the weather. They all recount it similarly. Sounds lovely, even ideal. There was a lack of tension.

The group decided to have their first show in London for obvious reasons: a desire to spread their wings (one of the artists had never shown outside of Canada), to see how their work looked in another context, for exposure, the experience and the opportunities it might create.

The Nunnery is an artist-run organization in London's East End—just east of appealing. The area is unapologetically working class, it is grey, and a bit eerie. It is not far from the site where

A flywheel by definition regulates, smoothes

things out and maintains some sort of evenness

Rachel Whiteread displaced a house with concrete to create *House* (1993-94), which was subsequently destroyed because of its "offensiveness." The gallery is quite spectacular though. It's a Victorian building with 12th-century foundations, and the former convent of the Carmelite nuns. In 1998, Bow Arts Trust opened it as a gallery with adjoining studio space. The gallery essentially consists of two white cubes that are connected by a vaulted corridor with a fantastic (and possibly the original) tile floor. Not readily visible from the street, this is a "destination" venue. The art-going public in London is committed and plentiful so venues like this can count on an audience.

There were two invitations for the show; the same text was printed on both but they carried different images. One showed an airport terminal from above, simple stacked shapes, suggesting the form of a wheel. Actually, it is the first terminal that was completed at Pearson International airport. The other was an image of a snowy mountain landscape with a couple of diminutive figures and an early all-terrain vehicle. Both looked like models for a real thing, like ideas: unreal and decadent, but plausible. Placing these images at the top of the invitation and using them to represent the show, Lewis Nicholson announced the conceptual tenor of the exhibition as oblique.

A graphic designer, Nicholson's work involves impressing content on the surface, and as a member of Flywheel his choice of images is a conceptual key worth taking note of. Seen together, they suggest things like the desire for another place, here and there, and a sober sense of the marvellous. His work also speaks to the independent voices that gave rise to Flywheel in the first place, which makes me wonder just how legible these images are meant to be. They hover there on the invitation, and I am wary to pin them down.

A flywheel is a heavy wheel that regulates the speed and uniformity of the machine to which it is attached or related; it smoothes the operation by maintaining a constant speed over the whole cycle. The flywheel signifies the collective. Most of the work in the exhibition is understated, nothing in it overwhelms. As a collective exhibition, it is flat, but twisted. It presents a thoughtful and complex weaving that takes us in different directions. It is framed with loose ends rather than hard edges. I appreciate that these artists leave room for an audience and that they expect something from us as well.

The gallery jogs and the show follows it around. Hugo Glendinning and Tim Etchells' *Rules of the Game* was installed on the walls as you enter the gallery, at the end of the corridor that connects the first space with the second, and continued on the walls of the second space. The work pairs impudent photographs (actually ink-jet prints) with sheets of text that list the rules of the game, which are apparently being played out in the photos. The images appear to be candid shots from a party with a group

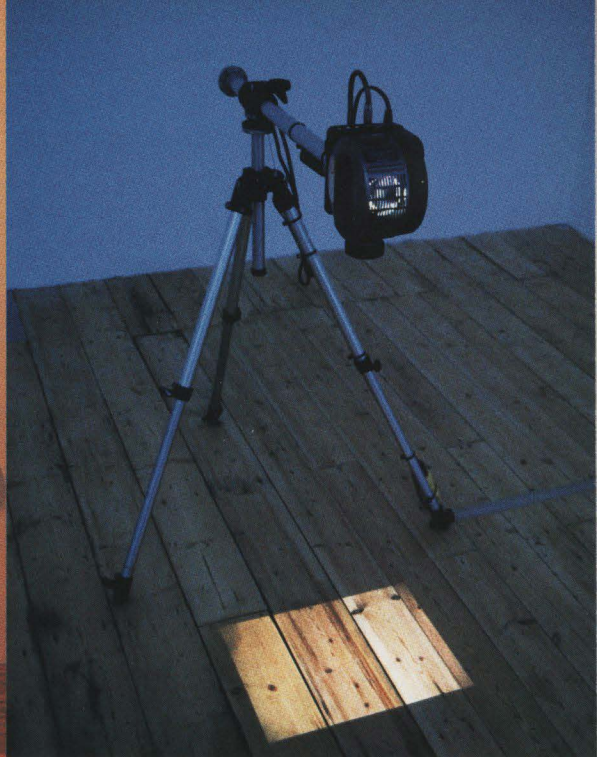
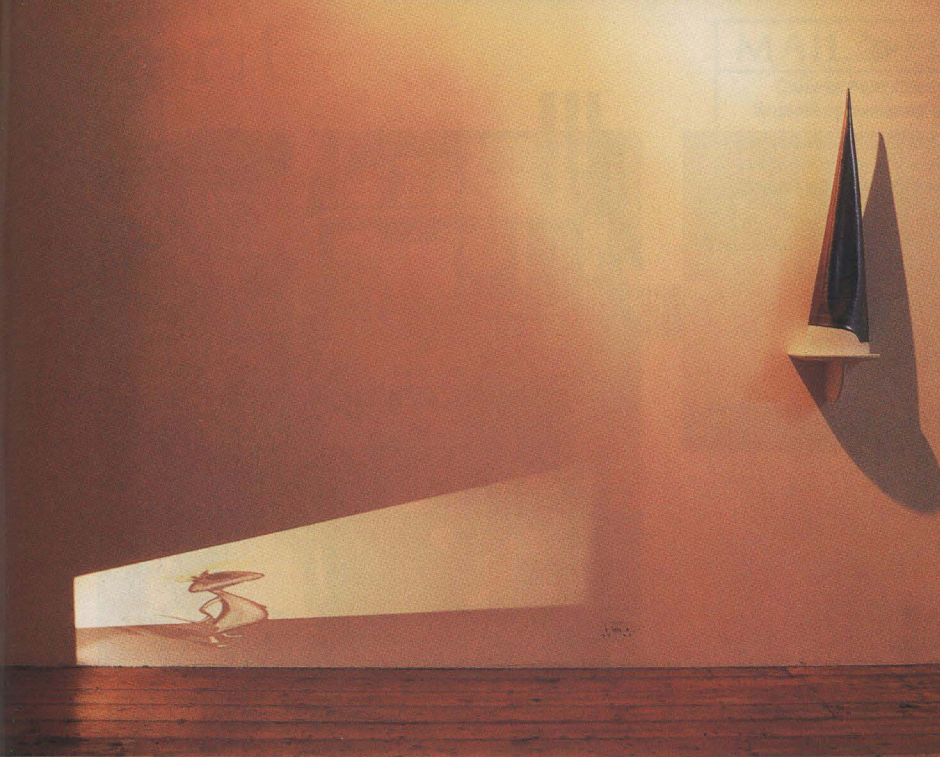
of people playing a drinking game and slowly losing their clothes—so, lots of ass, some breasts and much goofiness. In fact, it is a group of performers who the artists work with and know well. The shots did not appear staged though—a combination of good acting and a photographer who is expert enough to produce work that looks offhand. I think the ultimate object of the game was to drink without getting drunk and keep your clothes on, so these were mostly a bunch of losers.

The rules, relating to the TV news they were watching, included things like "for any mention of the royal family—all take one sip," "for a kid in a coma—1 drink," "for a life support machine switched off—3 drinks," and finally, "for an item on the death of the universe—the girls go down on the person to their right." So that is a good thing then? I tried to tease some reason from the work. And I reckoned from the fatalist undertone that the game they were referring to was life. The calibration, which determined how much to drink (and how bad things could get) had to do with the artists' sensibility, which came through as somewhat wicked, but smart and witty. The suggestion was that in this game one has no control and the only thing to do is play along. The cold-hearted, insensitive, draconian people are the ones that fare well—these would be the *winners* of the game.

As it goes, the images are amusing and the shamelessness is liberating. But that may have nothing to do with the game. I imagine that the players didn't even know they were playing one—they look too unburdened and irresponsible to be playing by any rules. The rules were pinned up after the game had been played out. It is the artists' wry application of these rules to the images that makes this work.

Karen Henderson's video, with a small projector attached to a tripod, projected a video loop onto the floor in the front gallery with *Rules of the Game* on the walls. The equipment was bulky and static in relation to the mercurial image. It is a beautiful work: quiet, compelling and strange. It's called *1012 pictures of this floor with a different pool of water in each one*. Henderson took that number of still shots in order to make a film loop which she then transferred to video. She projected the work back onto the same spot that she shot, so there is a bounce inherent in the piece. It actually looks like an amoeba doing a jig, but it suggests the state of mind of a nervous, tentative person. The video is riveting to watch: the movement is slightly unnerving, but the repetitive gesture is hypnotic.

Henderson's motivation and laborious process are awesome. Her work almost always involves an arduousness, though she prefers not to claim this part of it. Perhaps that's because she thinks it would stifle the work and still it. Since Henderson documents the minutiae of change, it would be anathema to load it with the weight of her labour and risk fixing it. For *1012 pictures*, she chose a section of the floor, and with the pool of water as a lens, she



focused on it, as though she was trying to see it and know it. In effect she isolated a piece of the floor and animated it. The focus transformed it from nothing much into something. Her motivation seems to be acknowledgement.

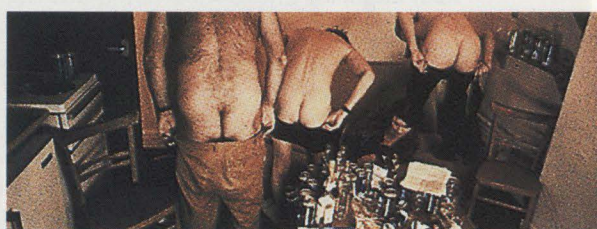
The show sat in the space comfortably. It was evenly installed, like a series of punctuations marking each turn in the place. The installation reminded me of the images on the invitation, and their suggestion that we figure out how to get where we are going, or be where we are.

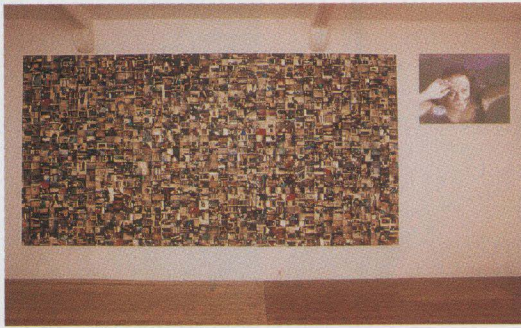
In the white-washed, barrel-vaulted corridor with the magnificent tile floor, Marla Hlady showed works from the *Amusement Machine* series. It's a formal passage, ideal for Hlady's sculptures because it facilitated their transformation from toys into amazing objects. She stripped 12 battery-operated toys of their casings to reveal their surprisingly beautiful innards. Each was plugged into the wall, and with a flick of the switch they'd spin their wheels and make that simulated noise that toys make. That they worked was the least interesting part, though the control I had over them was also of little consequence to me. What mattered were the exquisite forms that Hlady discovered disguised as trite toys. This body of work had been shown at Cold City Gallery in Toronto a year before, and at the time I was not able to get over what the toys did. This time I realized that they did not need to do a thing, they were fantastic inert objects; and I did not need to see them work to be reminded of what they were.

ABOVE LEFT: **Michael Buchanan**
Spell 1997-99
Digital media, fabric,
miscellaneous electrical hardware,
painted wooden shelf
Photo Hugo Glendinning
Courtesy the artist

ABOVE RIGHT: **Karen Henderson**
1012 pictures of this floor
with a different pool of water
in each one 1999
16mm colour film transferred to
video, projector, tripod
Photo Hugo Glendinning
Courtesy the artist

BELOW: **Tim Etchells**
and Hugo Glendinning
Rules of the Game 1999
Ink jet and text
Photo Hugo Glendinning
Courtesy the artists





ABOVE AND RIGHT: **Gwen MacGregor**
my place (installation view
 and detail) 1999
 1200 colour photographs,
 video projection
 Photo Hugo Glendinning
 Courtesy the artist



Perched there, they became ironic, at last relieved of their disguise.

It is curious that I found the sound of Hlady's work menacing. Somehow it interrupted what it seemed the works were saying. These *Amusement Machines* did not appear to me as plastic toys; they had been inverted, so that function became form. This is what I thought I would hear when I looked at them.

Gwen MacGregor and Michael Buchanan installed their work in the back gallery. Buchanan's *Spell* was a digitally rendered animated loop projected onto a wall beside a gesticulating hat on a shelf. The projection appeared as a longitudinal slice along the wall, as though it happened to meet the wall as it tried to escape. The loop showed a mouse walking forward, confidently, and then suddenly, as it went beyond its comfort zone, the head swung and the arms flailed and it turned back fearfully to its original spot, where it regained composure and set out again. The simple circular gesture continued, repeatedly. The tall, witch-like hat placed at the end of the projection was motionless except when, every so often, it would bend slightly, like a bow. The work was trapped in a monotonous cycle that was without end. It was cute at first, then pathetic.

What resonated most were the tell-tale signs of the walk: tentative and without conviction. *Spell* was going nowhere, and it was not clear where it came from—there was no beginning and no end (and there were no chords). The installation was suspended there. I knew as I walked away that things would continue exactly as they had before I got there. Too bad. If Buchanan was commenting on the way things go, then I wanted to object: patterns are requisite and inevitable, but as with cancer, we must study the mouse and figure out how to *do things differently*. Unlike Joseph Beuys, Buchanan was not elevating the status of animals to that of humans; rather he was doing just the opposite.

On the opposite wall was MacGregor's *my place*, also a work that combined two seemingly disparate parts: a massive photo collection of her stuff, arranged in a grid, was mounted on the wall alongside a video projection of footage from "The Prisoner," a British television program. *my place* is an expanded and

reconfigured version of *whatever*, which MacGregor installed in a small storage space in Toronto the year before as part of the show "Moving and Storage." The fantastic landscape and somewhat obscure footage (1960s futuristic) were linked by overtones of rigidity and control. The items in MacGregor's work were labelled with a round, white, numbered sticker, but her arrangement was not in any discernable order. The numbering system was necessary for MacGregor's recent move. Her desire to document likely came from incredulity, and her ordering was perhaps just an intuitive thing. One wonders: is this all her stuff? Is it a lot (it appears to be) or would my stuff be just as sprawling if it were laid out like this? What does the projection beside say, if anything, about the stuff?

It occurred to me that there is something hermetic about MacGregor's work: it's tough to crack, unknowable but intriguing. It worked well in the former nunnery. Shoes, plants, a Christmas tin, a lid, hot peppers strung on a line, toys, a paint tray. It was the density, the combination of essentials and frivolities, and the texture that made this terrain worth navigating. Some of the stuff was interesting, some of it was not. Not surprisingly when things are separated and taken out of context, stripped from the narrative to which they belonged, they silence. But it's a cacophony when all the murmurs come together.

I returned to see the exhibition several times. The Flywheel collective is indeed a coming together of independent practices. This was not a curated show, it stemmed from issues of respect, camaraderie and the desire for a vehicle to show work, which does make a group show but not a tight weaving. A flywheel by definition regulates, smoothes things out and maintains some sort of evenness. In the case of the Flywheel collective, it seems that the dynamics of the group—as defined by the flywheel—were imprinted legibly onto the exhibition. The show happened to be in London, at The Nunnery, but it could have been anywhere. Most of the work was engaging, but not spectacular—a sober sense of the marvellous. There was nothing heavy-handed, but neither was it a light show; it was informed by a *jouissance*, which is refreshing and important. ■