CUL-DE-SAC

Jordi Colomer
Brette Gabel & Robin Lambert
Laurie Kang
Isabelle Hayeur
Kelly Mark
Alex Morrison

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Anik Glaude, Curator, The Varley Art Gallery of Markham
Foreward

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Foreward

The Varley Art Gallery of Markham is proud to present *Cul-de-sac*, the first in what we hope to become a series of collaborations between York University and the Varley. Through the exhibition and accompanying publication, the curatorial team of Karie Liao, Maria Alejandrina Coates and Fiona Wright have astutely chosen to explore the concept of suburbia—one that is timely and most appropriate to the location of the Varley.

Cul-de-sac forces us to question the ways that we define ourselves by where we live. The gallery, located at the crossroads between the historic village of Unionville and the primarily suburban town of Markham, offers a unique blend of old and new. It is this contemporaneity of past and present that makes the Varley an ideal starting point for discussions surrounding the notion of suburbia.

Being a recent graduate myself, I realize the importance of work-based learning, having gone through similar training for the completion of my Master's degree. The Varley Art Gallery is proud to position itself as a training and mentorship site, where students can develop their own creative curatorial potential under the guidance of established museum professionals. By providing the resources and support needed to develop such projects, we are offering these students the practical experience needed to kick-start their careers in the cultural sector.

Curatorial practice is quickly developing into a highly professionalized discipline. As a result, post-secondary institutions are now recognizing the need to train their students for curatorial work and criticism. Curatorial practice demands a solid knowledge of art historical discourses and of the exhibition development process, but also the skills needed to navigate the institutional systems where artworks are presented. Curators trained within the classroom have an essential need for hands-on and on-site work experience. As guest curators for this exhibition, these students were instrumental in developing the theme, determining the scope of the project, contacting the artists and installing the works in the gallery.

As a small municipal art gallery, we often rely on guest curators to compliment and expand our in-house programming. This allows us to present exhibitions, covering a multitude of artistic periods and genres, which we may not have been able to show otherwise. Often, these guest curators are experts in their fields and can offer the host institution their knowledge and experience, as well as new and diverging perspectives on a given topic. It is for these reasons that we value the collaborative process inherent to such exchanges.

Above all, we offer the curators our heartfelt thanks—for their collaboration and commitment to this exhibition, and for their wonderful enthusiasm throughout the course of the project. We wish you luck in all future endeavours! We would also like to thank Professor Anna Hudson for her guidance, Amy Wallace and the entire catalogue committee for their wonderful publication. We are grateful to the Ontario Arts Council, the Town of Markham and the Art History Graduate Students Association of York University; to the artists and their representing galleries; and to the entire staff of the Varley.

Cul-de-sac, an exhibition and catalogue produced by Masters students in Art History at York University, marks the beginning of a mentoring program offered by the Varley Art Gallery of Markham to support future generations of Canadian curators. The Gallery's commitment to education and to serving their community of York Region —including students at Canada's most diverse university—is both generous and significant. I share with the Director of the Varley, Francine Périnet, a concern for engaged and embodied knowledge that transcends difference while welcoming debate. We believe this exhibition is only the beginning of an institutional partnership through which resources, skills, ideas, and audiences can be shared and will grow. Our goal is to create a rich and mutually rewarding opportunity to teach and learn outside the walls of the university.

Cul-de-sac is an inspired theme that embraces York Region's suburban identity while, at the same time, destabilizing its definition. The houses being built in one of the Region's many new developments might look the same but the people living there are far from homogenous. The non- or nowhere-places of modernity described by the French anthropologist, Marc Augé, might instead be recognized as constellations of belonging. This exhibition and catalogue thus contribute to recent debates about the future of national identity in a globalized world, encouraging dialogue within and between communities and between individuals of different communities. Contemporary curatorial practice can engage dynamic networks of communication across constituent cultural boundaries and contribute, as a result, to the formation of a continually negotiated public space.[1] This space, literally, is found in the art gallery where the "real Canada," to rewrite Northrop Frye, remains an ideal with everybody in it.

My sincerest thanks to Francine Périnet and to the Varley Art Gallery's curator, Anik Glaude, who played a lead role in this mentoring opportunity. And to the tremendously talented and hardworking graduate student team—Karie Liao, Fiona Wright, Maria Alejandrina Coates, Amy C. Wallace, Amanda Brason, Dory Smith, Emma Conner, and Ekaterina Kotikova—huge congratulations. The exhibition and catalogue have grown from the rich foundation of thought and discussion achieved at *Revisiting Suburbia*, a graduate student international symposium held at York this past April. To that team—especially Maxine Proctor and Saelan Twerdy—additional thanks are due.

1 Ephraim Nimni, "Conclusion: The sovereign predicament of dispersed nations," in *National Cultural Autonomy and its Contemporary Critics*, ed. by Ephraim Nimni (Milton Park, Oxon: Routledge, 2005), 237.

By Maria Coates, Karie Liao, and Fiona Wright
Cul-De-Sac

Imagine yourself moving through a suburban neighbourhood. As you turn down an unremarkable street, you see a No Exit sign. Though the term cul-de-sac most commonly refers to a dead-end street, following this pathway leads you forward and around a loop, where you find yourself returning to the same place where the path began. This is the particularity of the 'cul-de-sac': in itself an emblem of suburban life. This trip could be taking you through a wealthy community where the cul-de-sac provides a safe enclave for children to play. Just as easily, however, it could be a dangerous place in an inner-city suburb, being an isolated place providing perfect concealment from the law. Both of these extremes are potentially correct descriptions of the suburban environment, but the former has been disseminated through popular culture and media as signifier of idealized living. In fact, varied suburban developments have evolved geographically, historically, economically, socially, and architecturally throughout the past sixty years. The promise of a stable idyllic life in suburbia arose in North America after the Second World War, and can be tied to the promises of progress that are inherent to the project of modernity.[1] While the fantasy remains in the present day, however, it has been undermined by the realities of a postmodern society in ways that are surprising, creative, and violent.

Once again, in the cul-de-sac we find not just a dead end, but rather a looped pathway that, while moving forward, forces a return. Looking at the original cultural promises of the suburbs, the circularity of this analogy refers back to its guiding modernist principles and its contemporary state amidst the rapidly changing cultural, social, economic, and political

environments. In other words, the circular return forced by the cul-de-sac creates a new direction for artistic inquiry that is concerned with examining the relationship between modernity and suburbia in the present. *Cul-de-Sac* intends to disrupt fixed ideas of suburbia by highlighting some of the real and imagined creative transformations and threats that are cultivated within this environment. The artists in this exhibition examine how the exterior and interior spaces of the suburbs are haunted by the failures, successes, paradoxes and contradictions of its modernist agenda.

The pieces presented by **Jordi Colomer** and **Isabelle Hayeur** focus on the architectural structures that emerge from the modernist ideals governing suburban life. The work of both **Kelly Mark** and **Alex Morrison** moves beyond these exterior facades and delves into the interior and psychological spaces of the private home. Similarly, the practice of **Laurie Kang** and **Brette Gabel** & **Robin Lambert** address these issues by presenting a particular view of suburban life and culture that demonstrates the ways in which it is informed by unique individual and collective identities.

Jordi Colomer's 2009 film, *Avenida Ixtapaluca (Houses for Mexico)* begins with an aerial camera shot moving down into a street view that focuses on the architectural layout of an underprivileged suburb in Mexico City. The work explores the tensions created by the imposed architectural paradigm of the well-known Californian bungalows onto the social culture of Mexico. The movement through this exterior introduces the suburbs as a case study that is symbolic of the modern phenomenon of urban sprawl. As the camera quietly moves through the space, the view enables a paced glance on the hegemonic status of international relations through the attempted regimentation of inhabitants' daily lives imposed by an Euro-American template of modernist architecture and urban planning. The work conveys that any "one-size-fits-all" approach is a myopic and simplistic enterprise bound for complications and even failure. In his *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin theorized that the suburbs could be considered in two ways: as a mold for its inhabitants and as the repository for the traces of their lives.[2] This exhibition suggests that

1   Though Jon C. Teaford has argued that suburbia has existed in (North) America for "as long as the nation itself," he readily admits that "For many (North) Americans, the word *suburb* conjures up an image of post-World War II single-family tract homes, products of automobiles and superhighways." Usually, any discussion of suburbia starts with a description of this particular manifestation of suburbia. It is an ideal that might never have existed except in society's imagination. The tendency to use this image as a starting point and then to move forward from there to complicate that notion emphasizes just how much this image is ingrained in the collective consciousness. See Jon C. Teaford. *The American Suburb: The Basics.* (New York: Routledge, 2008) and Paul Barker. *The Freedoms of Suburbia.* (London: Frances Lincoln Limited, 2009).

2   Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century (Exposé of 1939)." In *The Arcades Project,* 14–26. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002, 20.

the cul-de-sac embodies both of these scenarios. It becomes the mold from which suburbia is built upon, and acts as the receptacle for where these traces are found and accumulated. **Colomer's** *Avenida Ixtapaluca* epitomizes Benjamin's claim: though the architecture and street plan is meant to mold this suburb into a chimera of Euro-American modern life, the culture of its inhabitants actively surfaces from within the imposed model.

The idea of the mold and repository of suburbia continues in many of the other artworks in the exhibition. **Isabelle Hayeur's** large-scale photographs of suburban model homes in Montréal are facades of structures that are yet to be filled. They are meant to be literal molds for an entirely new community. By their very definition, however, model homes are not intended to have inhabitants. They are fantasy homes, meant to entice potential buyers for new suburban developments. Their structures act as an empty receptacle for the public to project their desires of imagined futures in the privilege and seclusion of suburbia. This is certainly true of *Tiffany*, with her castle-like architecture and the acres of property in the distance. Yet, when looking more closely, we see that the stonework on the exterior is not consistent and the number of roof tiers is absurd. In this sense **Hayeur's** photographs activate the delusions of suburban greatness as a critical enterprise by pushing the unfulfillable fantasy even further: these models are not real and have never truly existed. As images, they are digital compositions of photographs of multiple structures. These images are built upon the modern foundations of a suburban promise and yet they thwart any hopes of their materialization through their existence as a postmodern pastiche.

The empty, bare frame of one of **Hayeur's** photo-compositions, *Ellen* (2005), echoes the structure of Vancouver-based **Alex Morrison's** drawings in his ongoing installation, *Every House I've Ever Lived In (Drawn from Memory)* (1999–ongoing). **Hayeur's** photographs use multiple houses to construct a desirable suburban identity for a future homebuyer. **Morrison**, however, brings together a high number of dwellings from

his past to project another kind of lifestyle: a subculture identity based on transient living.

In the original installation of this work, **Morrison** drew the house-like structure directly onto the gallery walls. He did not adhere to any scale or chronological order, and this unrestrained style emphasized the characteristics of the artist's projected lifestyle. As such, the work can be seen as a counterpoint to the ideal qualities of suburban life: stability and orderliness. In *Cul-de-Sac*, however, the installation differs. Here, **Morrison's** past residences are drawn on sheets torn from a sketchbook. The frame of each drawing presents them uniform in size to the extent that their even placement on the gallery walls can be compared to the structured rows of residential suburban planning. In any case, this work addresses how past memories can represent an idea of the home, no matter how transient or abundant its mold.

In both **Morrison** and **Hayeur's** artworks, past and present architectural elements are intertwined. In **Hayeur's** model home *Virginia*, for example, the pre-fabricated bland cream siding and the maroon roof tiles are intercut with a faded wooden exterior, boarded up windows, and open holes for a side door. In an interesting parallel, **Morrison's** work explores the kind of lifestyle that constantly moves forward and around. Leaping from one house to the next, the past remains only as a flimsy, skeletal version of itself. In this sense, both works are presented ambiguously between the palpable ruins of the realized modern structure and its preparation for reconstruction and renewal; a perpetual sentence for those caught in the forward-moving current of modern progress.[3]

The structure of the architectural mold explored by **Colomer**, Hayeur, and **Morrison** is set in relation to the interior spaces that receive and record the actions of those who inhabit them. Modern thought has created a clear delineation between social spaces inside and outside the home. In this sense, the suburbs become the platform for an investigation into the contemporary divide between domestic and public space. The video

3 Jean-Francois Lyotard names linear narratives as an essential feature of the modernist agenda and the idea of progress unfolding through time. Jean-Francois Lyotard. "Introduction." In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1979), xxiv.

works of **Alex Morrison** and **Kelly Mark** do just that. As an avid skate-boarder, many of **Morrison's** artistic projects often focus on his partici-pation within this subculture. *Homewrecker* is a video that follows **Morrison's** own skateboarding performance throughout a non-descript residential interior. The private space of this house is disrupted through its use as a platform for an activity that is meant to be performed outside and in public. It is a clear challenge to the modernist tendency to divide these spaces absolutely.

Alex Morrison's *Homewrecker* simultaneously brings the public realm into the private, and the private into the public. **Kelly Mark's** video-instal-lation *REM* is similar in that it is an inversion of the same binary. **Mark** inserts the most passive activity performed in the suburban home – watch-ing television – into the public space of the art gallery; she exposes the private infiltration of television into the home. The video-installation resembles that of a basement living room. Playing on the television screen is a mash-up documentation of different shows and films recorded from broadcast television during the period between April 1 and July 31, 2007. The act of watching broadcast television is common in suburban life, specifically within the private, interior and domestic household. Certainly television, and technology in general, has been closely associated with modernity. From the outset, the television was considered a sign of sta-tus. Though televisions in households today have become commonplace or even trivial (in competition with the internet as the new populist media) they continue to epitomize the interior of the modern home. Its pervasive-ness has turned watching television into an idle activity in which capitalist broadcasters lull unassuming consumers into a state of complacency. In this context, the "armchair traveler," describes an individual who experi-ences life vicariously and indirectly though television programs but is vir-tually sheltered from the realities of life. In *REM*, the complacent act of "vegging out" is exposed as a behavioral symptom of modern suburban life. Deviating from the perception of television as a mechanism of passiv-ity, *REM* is exemplary of how watching television can be an act of agen-cy. **Mark** appropriates these images by recording clips from movies and

shows and manipulates the supposedly rigid structure of television pro-gramming. Her video piece stresses an awareness of how movies and television programs exist as a reflection of the grand narratives that con-struct social roles and expectations. Indeed, it is classic American televi-sion programs that have projected ideal visions of suburbia onto society's collective consciousness.

Laurie Kang's *Suburban Romance* (2007), which is situated in Markham, does not explicitly reference any one particular suburb. **Kang's** photo-graphs focus on objects commonly found in suburban space, capturing the calm and bucolic environment that has become familiar through per-sonal lived experience or through depictions in popular culture. There is a calmness in **Kang's** empty photographs: light filtered underneath a picket fence, or a lone tree in a backyard, yet the photographs are sur-prisingly compelling. They reveal the romantic, unique, and unusual quali-ties of ubiquitous objects. Her lens creates anthropomorphic beings out of house façades, or finds idiosyncrasies in suburban icons, like the crooked fence that follows a hilly lawn. The overturned basketball net, or the eerily trimmed, too-perfect shrubs reveal the trace of suburbanite existence. From the preconception of suburbia as a dead-end place to that of a fertile ground for inquiry, *Suburban Romance* works to revive suburbia as a dynamic place.

This vitality is addressed in **Brette Gabel** and **Robin Lambert's** collabora-tive project *Show Us Your Unionville!*, which delves into the ways that the unique characteristics of each suburban development, which is so often assumed to be a generic residential neighbourhood, can inform an individual's identity and experience of place. The Varley Art Gallery has commissioned their project specifically for this exhibition as a way to involve the residents of Unionville in an artistic exploration of their home. Unionville is an especially active and complex site of inquiry, as its long history and contemporary identity demonstrates.[4] Today, as a historical community within the suburban town of Markham, Unionville complicates definitions of suburbia as a "new," peripheral, and residential-based

4 Unionville was founded as a hamlet in the early 1800s, and because it's development occurred away from the roadway, much of the nineteenth-century village remains intact today. In the 1960s, "Unionville's first major subdivision was just being planned and eager families were discovering Unionville's suburban tranquility was a good place to escape the urban-ization of Metropolitan Toronto." Community pride in the historical identity of Unionville has resulted in making the original village "one of the most popular tourist and shopping attractions in southern Ontario." Today, Unionville is one of six communities that make up Markham. See Wendy Priesnitz, Markham: Canada's community of the future: A contemporary portrait. (Burlington, On.: Windor Publications, in cooperation with the Markham Board of Trade, c.1990).

landscape. For the project, **Gabel** and **Lambert** use Craigslist, a popular classifieds website, to meet with residents of Unionville for breakfast. The artists asked each resident about their city: favorite restaurant, best place to take a nap in public, what they think of their neighbours, etc. After the meal, the artists performed the activities that they had just learned about. A visual and audio record of their adventures was created for display in the Varley Art Gallery. This casual and informal engagement with Unionville opens up an insider's perspective to the area, one that reveals new insights about every-day life in suburbia. Local and individualized experience is turned into a shared history that allows the viewer to unexpectedly re-discover and explore the vigor of suburban neighborhoods through participatory re-enactment.

Moving through the different realms of suburban life, we see how these traces of experience exist in the architectural mold of the suburbs. This movement acts to reveal and unravel the modernist assumptions embedded in its construction. Arriving where we begin, and ready to start again, something has somehow shifted. Never fully a closed circle, the cul-de-sac leaves room for the continual examination of modern life as we carry on through the paved pathway set out in front of us.

By Meghan Sutherland
Suburbia and the Popular Imagination

In the roughly one hundred years that have passed since the first suburban build-outs began to appear on the outskirts of North American cities, the patterns of development described by the term "suburbia" have changed repeatedly, and so have the demographic coordinates of the people who live there. Over the last fifty years or so, scholars, journalists, artists, and producers of pop culture have taken pains to document the racial, ethnic, generational, and ideological diversification of suburbia, and to draw out the implications it holds for the way we understand the latter's social, political, and ecological significance. On the terrain of scholarship we might think of Valerie C. Johnson's *Black Power in the Suburbs* (SUNY Press, 2002), or Thomas Sugrue and Kevin Kruse's edited anthology *The New Suburban History* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), among many other studies. On TV, updated versions of the classic family television sitcom abound, including ABC's *Modern Family* and TBS's *Tyler Perry's House of Payne*. In the realm of fine art, Laura E. Migliorino's *Hidden Suburbs*, a series of photographs foregrounding the changing demographic makeup of the suburban enclave, comes immediately to mind, as does Larry Sultan's series of photographs *The Valley*, which catalogues the LA porn stars and producers that occupy many of the seemingly typical suburban homes in that notoriously suburban environ. And in the domain of more utilitarian modes of representation, we might think of the recent flurry of interest surrounding the release of the 2010 U.S. Census data on suburban growth, which offered perhaps the most vivid confirmation yet of the demographic changes that suburban America has undergone in the last twenty years.[1] In short, the changing image of the "typical" suburban household has hardly lacked publicity.

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1 See for example, the enormous spread of articles that The New York Times published on the subject on 15 December 2010, which included: Sabrina Tavernise and Robert Gebeloff, "Immigrants Make Path to Suburbia, Not Cities," The New York Times, 15 December 2010, A15.

Of course, it is important to note that the goal of these efforts is not simply to make sense of suburbia *per se*. At the heart of all them, despite their many differences, lies a tacit intuition that insisting upon the particularity and diversity of suburbia's inhabitants will constitute a corrective to the image of suburbia that assumed hegemonic dominance with the iconic American sitcoms of the 1950s—an image that has remained stubbornly fixed in the popular imagination of suburbia ever since, as if it were burned into the phosphors of an outdated cathode ray television set. Moreover, inextricable from this intuition is the assumption that demystifying the dominant image of the average suburban inhabitant will yield special insight into the "ordinary people" that ultimately make up society as a whole; the identities, values, struggles, and desires that define them as they change or do not change; and the shape of the world that will be remade in their image over the coming years. Indeed, while Lewis Mumford's observation that "the building of houses constitutes the major architectural work of any civilization" is often presented as a justification for studying suburbia—it appears, for instance, in the introduction of Kenneth T. Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier*—it would be prudish to deny that the interest surrounding the building of *mass-produced* housing ultimately revolves around a considerably narrower, more maligned figuration of the social than "civilization," if not the figuration of its outright opposite—an irony to which the very invocation of Mumford's name here may alert us already.[2] Put more bluntly, a significant part of the reason that we concern ourselves with the task of revisiting suburbia, whether we seek to complicate or confirm its dominant image, is the fact that in one way or another, we think of it as holding a privileged link to the terrain of "the popular" in the best and worst senses of that term. It is at once the dwelling space of "real, ordinary people"—insofar as that designation implies an implicit quality of individual insignificance and wide availability—and the quintessential embodiment of the undistinguished aesthetic sensibility that confirms the status of suburban people as "real" and "ordinary" in comparison to the dominant image of their urban counterparts. It is not too much to say that it represents at once the literal and the figurative domain of the popular imagination itself, the beginning and the end of a

tautology that is perhaps fundamental to the discourse of suburbia as such.

The dominant image of the suburban landscape has undergone less dramatic renovations in the last fifty years. To be sure, various artists and critics have made similar efforts to detail the particular patterns distinguishing different historical moments of suburban development—Dolores Hayden and John Archer, chief among them—and artists such as Paho Mann have made an effort to articulate a certain aesthetic diversification of the mass-produced structures that define suburban architecture above all.[3] At the heart of most of *these* efforts, however, there lies a tacit admission that for the most part suburban architecture is poorly built and isolating, designed under the auspices of economic rather than aesthetic value, and that more or less simply, the standardized reproduction of the built environment that suburbia embodies will prove economically, ecologically, and sociologically unsustainable. Despite its better intentions, Mann's series of photographs *Re-Inhabited Circle K's*, which delineates the remarkable array of aesthetic and functional reinventions of the basic Circle K structure, may demonstrate this point best of all. For indeed, it is nothing more or less than the mass-produced skeleton of the economic structure that repeats across each of the otherwise different images that secures the aesthetic unity of the series as a whole. In other words, it is the underlying structural homogeneity of the highly capitalized landscape of suburban architecture that puts into relief the differentiations that define the popular reinvention of this architecture, not to mention the idea of local color to which it thereby lays claim. The taxonomic aesthetic of the series form itself—which is to say, the display of variations on a fundamental theme that ultimately unites them—represents an anthropological rather than an aesthetic revaluation.[4] Much like the examples to which I've alluded thus far, it privileges an expression of the ingenuity and originality of the "ordinary people" that live in suburbia, and make something unique or even personal of the generic, shambling ruins that constitute its rapidly exhausting foundations, over the aesthetic significance of suburban development *per se*. If anything, it reaffirms the image of suburbia as an ill-conceived mode of geographical and architectural

2 See Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3.

3 See for example Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth*, 1820–2000 (New York: Vintage Books, 2003); John Archer, "Suburban Aesthetics Is Not an Oxymoron," in *Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes*, ed. Andrew Blauvelt (Minneapolis: Walker Arts Center, 2008), 129–146.

4 I develop a taxonomic understanding of the aesthetic of serial display at much greater length in my dissertation on variety entertainment and spectacle, which I am currently adapting into a book manuscript. For expansion of this idea, and the political implications that I discuss in relation to it in the final pages of the essay, see Meghan Sutherland, "Variety, or the Spectacular Logics of American Liberal Democracy," PhD Diss., Northwestern University, 2007); Sutherland, "Populism and Spectacle," in *Cultural Studies* (forthcoming, 2011).

schematism whose conceit of cookie-cutter mass production must be *detourned* in order to warrant aesthetic valuation—unless, of course, that valuation comes in the form of an inquiry into the process of social abstraction itself. Here as well, then, the landscape of suburbia seems to serve as an embodiment of popular aesthetic form through which the diversity of the "real, ordinary people" who live there can be rearticulated anew; the iconography of suburbia again becomes the subject, the object, and the medium of the popular imagination all at once.

When seen this way, it is both more and less surprising that despite every effort to the contrary, the discourse of suburbia that seems most anti-thetical to the project of its hegemonic rearticulation—the discourse of suburbia as a non-place, or a place devoid of geographical specificity or even concrete existence in reality—has remained so firmly entrenched in the popular discourse that surrounds it.[5] It is more surprising because we all know very well by now that the suburbs of contemporary North America no longer suit the iconography of a faceless, featureless, unchanging mass, and that such a "mass" never really existed in the first place. Moreover, if anything, the anxiety that most palpably surrounds the discourse of suburbia today—the threat of sprawl—would seem to imply a fundamental *excess* and *disorder* in the material experience of the suburban landscape, rather than a negation of its basic claim to exis-tence. The persistence of the non-place discourse of suburbia is less surprising, however, because—at least in my estimation—the effort to rearticulate the dominant image of suburbia by changing primarily the image of the people it implicitly houses shares at least two fundamental affinities with the rhetoric of social and aesthetic homogeneity that it seeks to dislodge. The first of these affinities concerns an aesthetic devaluation of suburban architecture as such. For instance, in the pro-logue to *Home from Nowhere*, James Howard Kunstler—the author of *The Geography of Nowhere* as well, and thus, arguably the poet laureate of suburbia as non-place—provides a simple rationale for this terminolo-gy, noting, "Suburbia fails us in large part because it is so abstract. It's an idea of a place rather than a place. The way you can tell is because so

many places in this country seem like no place in particular, and a lack of particularity is the earmark of abstraction."[6] As I have already suggested, the most prominent efforts to recast the demographic iconography of contemporary suburbia do much to contest the idea that suburbia as a whole lacks any distinguishing features. And yet, at the same time, they generally do little to dispute the prevailing notion that the mass-produced environment holds no aesthetic significance in its own right. For example, while artistic interventions such as Migliorino's only seem to reaffirm this notion in order to highlight the contrasting diversity of a new generation of suburban populations—superimposing families expressly marked as "different" against the comparatively homogeneous facades of the sub-urban houses in which they dwell—ones like *Mann's Circle K* series, and Sultan's *Valley* series, tend to treat it like a blank canvas on which the aesthetic adornments and modifications of its residents can be read as a popular mode of architectural expression.[7] Either way, suburbia remains the functional equivalent of a place-holder for popular aesthetic expression, and in this much, its characterization as a non-place, or a negative receptacle to be adorned by whoever comes upon it, would seem all the more apt.

The second affinity between the effort to recast the popular image of suburbia and the rhetoric of nonspace that it seeks to displace concerns the confused relationship between reality and representation that serves as an implicit motivation for both of them. At the outset of this essay I proposed that much of our interest in revisiting the meaning of suburbia today depends on a tacit assumption that, behind the illusory image of popular culture's hegemonic representation of suburbia, there lies con-cealed a more representative image of "real" people and of their lives, and revealing it would constitute a demystification of the existing hegemonic image of the North American social body along the lines of a white, middle class norm. In no few respects, the accumulation of popular figurations that makes this scenario sound so complicated—the tautological notion that suburbia is quite literally popular, and thus holds a privileged place in the popular imagination for revealing a more accurate representation of the people who serve as the implicit subject doing the imagining—only

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5 For just one of literally thousands of examples, we could think of the enduring popularity of films that treat suburbia as a literal simulacrum, such as *The Truman Show* (1998), *Pleasantville* (1998), or *The Stepford Wives* (1975 & 2004).

6 James Howard Kunstler, *Home from Nowhere: Remaking Our Everyday World for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 17. See also Kunstler, *Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

7 Laura E. Migliorino's *Hidden Suburbs* series can be viewed on the artists website at: http://www.lauramigliorinoart.com/Thumbnails.html. Paho Mann's *Re-Inhabited Circle K's* series can likewise be viewed at: http://www.pahomann.com/circlekgallerys/circlek.php.

reaffirms the explanation for suburban nonspace that Margaret Morse provides in the influential essay "An Ontology of Everyday Distraction."[8] For in Morse's scenario, the elements associated with the fundamental infrastructure of suburbia deserve their distinction as non-space precisely because they structure a state of distraction between the terrains of virtual and actual space, so that the poles between reality and representation, and the general and the particular, effectively collapse into a simulacral evacuation of presence in the here-and-now—a scenario that Migliorino's signature aesthetic of superimposition, which divides the being of the suburban landscape against the being of its newest residents to suggest a decidedly ghostly existence, once again seems to telegraph into expressly visual terms. Despite all intentions to the contrary, then, the point remains the same: the unexamined elision of literal and figurative associations with the people and the popular that drives so many efforts to recast the image of suburbia seems a validation of Morse's argument for suburban non-space, rather than a counterpoint to it.

Although it may be hard to tell from my remarks thus far, my interest in highlighting the reciprocity between these two seemingly opposed ways of thinking about suburbia does not derive from a desire to dismiss the political urgency of either one, nor does it derive from a desire to dismiss the efforts of the artists working to transform the way we see the suburban landscape on their respective auspices. On the contrary, my goal is to dramatize the extent to which rethinking the supplementary relation between non-space and the popular imagination might help us to break through the impasse that has formed around them, particularly where it concerns the apparent break-down between the political and aesthetic dimensions of the problem that ultimately occupies them both: the hegemonic status of suburbia. More to the point, I would like to propose that if we want to revisit the iconography of suburbia with an eye to changing it, the question we must first confront regards the ways in which the aesthetic organization of the suburban landscape itself—precisely insofar as it might qualify for the designation of non-space—helps to structure our understanding of the relationship between suburbia and the hegemonic

social totality that implicitly grounds the very subject of the popular imagination—which is to say, "the people." For until we reconsider the ontological nature of the relation between the image of suburbia and the figure of the hegemonic subject with which it seems to go hand and hand, our best efforts to redirect the political uses to which both of these otherwise vague figures are generally put will continue to lead us to precisely the same place that they promised to all along: nowhere in particular.

In the spirit of tracing some initial steps for what I think is a considerably more productive route to the question of suburbia and hegemony, it is useful to revisit one of the more concrete repudiations of the suburban landscape that informs the discourse of nonspace—namely, Lewis Mumford's unforgettable characterization of the latter in an essay that appeared in 1961, shortly after he had abandoned his longstanding effort to advocate for smart suburban development. Mumford begins by citing the emergence of a new kind of community that now embodies the term suburbia, but simultaneously "caricature[s] both the historic city and the archetypbal suburban refuge."[9] He then goes on to describe this new community in a *tour de force* of rhetorical ingenuity, summoning the reader to envision:

> *a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis… [so that] the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible.*[10]

One of the many striking features of this swan song for the vacuity of the suburban built environment is just how strongly it resonates—at the level

8   Margaret Morse, "An Ontology of Everyday Distraction: The Freeway, the Mall, and Television," in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 193–221.

9   Lewis Mumford, "Suburbia: The End of a Dream," Horizons 3 (July 1961), reprinted in *The End of Innocence: A Suburban Reader*, ed. Charles M. Haar (Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman & Co., 1972), 57.
10   Ibid.

of both form and content—with the particular set of aesthetic relations that the political theorist Ernesto Laclau associates with the hegemonic logic of the empty signifier.

As Laclau explains most fully in the 1996 essay "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?" the discursive construction of any totality whatsoever depends on an impossible yet necessary task of signification.[11] Namely, a particular signifier from within the differential order of representation, despite its particular status as just another differential value from within this order, must nevertheless serve to signify the plenitude or wholeness that totality implies—a plenitude that by definition *exceeds* the limits of any differential signifying order, and thus, as Laclau points out, coincides with something like the Lacanian notion of the Real.[12] The empty signifier can perform this ontological task of discursive production precisely because of its capacity to empty itself out of its own potential to signify any one particular value from within that differential order, emphasizing instead the bonds of equivalence between a whole array of potential significations within its purview, and in the process, establishing what Laclau calls an "empty but ineradicable place" in the order of representation.[13] Laclau then identifies the complex set of aesthetic relations that constitute the rhetorical operation of the empty signifier with the ontological force of hegemony itself, which is to say, with a discursive intervention into the terrain of material relations whereby a *particular* representation of reality assumes the *generalizing* function of embodying reality as such.

This formulation of hegemony already offers compelling reasons to recognize the term "suburbia" as an empty signifier that is secured by the distinctly *indistinct* aesthetic configuration of the built environment that Mumford summons. After all, it is precisely the implicit equivalence or substitutability between one suburban house and another, one *suburb* and another, that prevents any particular *one* of them from serving as a sufficient referent for the kind of hegemonic generality that is demanded by the Latin pluralization of the term with the suffix *–a*, a suffix that

follows virtually all the most famous *topoi* of that absent plenitude known as "non-space," from utopia to dystopia and back again. In other words, the signifier "suburbia" has no signified, and can thus be understood as a fundamentally hegemonic topos in popular discourse—one that, rather exceptionally, derives its force from the hegemonic image of the suburban architecture that Mumford so vividly demonstrates to be devoid of the capacity for aesthetic *or* geographical differentiation.

To think of suburbia as an empty signifier that *itself* signifies a hegemonic relation, embodied by actual geographical patterns of development in the landscape, also does a great deal to explain the persistence of its image as a non-space. After all, it effectively *functions* as a signifier of hegemony that is etched into the graded contours of the earth, set in the aging cement foundations and highway systems of an iconic built environment that persists in the name of suburbia, even as it becomes overdetermined by the ever-accumulating additions of more and more suburbs, more and more "equivalences." And yet, to extend this line of thought somewhat further provides even more useful cues for making sense of the vexed relation between suburbia, hegemony, and the third set of terms under consideration here—namely, the popular and its imagination. For in the 2008 book *On Populist Reason,* Laclau makes his most detailed case yet that the aesthetics of "emptiness" associated with the hegemonic logic of the empty signifier also play an expanded role in the ontological constitution of the vague social entity known as "the people" —a figure that serves as both the founding referent and the deciding stake of all political discourse as such. Specifically, he identifies the reputedly "empty" rhetorical excess that is generally attributed to populist political epigones as nothing more or less than the aesthetic condition by which the social totality known as "the people"—an entity that, like all totalities, would be impossible to represent outside the hegemonic logic of the empty signifier—comes into discursive existence.[14]

According to this view, the very accumulation of tropological appeals and imagery that generally warrants a dismissal of populist rhetoric as

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11 Ernesto Laclau, "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?" *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), 36–46.

12 Laclau, 39.

13 Ibid., 40.

14 Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2007). Needless to say, I have drastically simplified Laclau's far more careful delineation of the rhetorical logic of populism for the purposes of this essay.

"empty" and even meaningless (think Rob Ford's "gravy train") in fact serves, by this very same virtue, to structure a broader set of discursive relations that is analogous to the logic of the empty signifier. More precisely, it hollows out the various different demands and identities of the individual groups that band together against the existing order of social representation, effectively constituting a *new* hegemonic image of "the people" that exceeds the former's newly apparent limits. And in this much, the aesthetic of rhetorical accumulation takes on a distinctly ontological significance in sociopolitical materiality. It constitutes the expressly discursive ground from which all hegemonic productions of the social begin: the rhetorical operation whereby a *particular* group of people (say, the white middle-class or the working-class) becomes aesthetically emptied out of its capacity to signify any one specific referent within the representational order of the social, and instead, assumes a metaphorical sense of identity with "the people" in general.

If we return once more to Mumford's invocation of the quintessential suburban non-space, it is difficult to ignore the rather striking resemblances between the "empty" rhetorical aesthetic that Laclau posits as the ontological "ground" on which the political figure of "the people" takes place and the rhetorical accumulation of repeated terms ("uniform," "uniform," "same," "same") and serial clauses ("the same houses, the same incomes") that Mumford uses to describe the hegemonic image of the suburban built environment. For in much the same way that Laclau posits an affect of "emptying out" that depends on the formation of a chain of metonymically linked equivalences—a chain whose members ultimately evacuate their ability to signify difference so that they can fuse into the very picture of generality—Mumford's intentionally robotic repetition of nearly identical rhetorical tropes of repetition does more than simply *describe* either the material reality of the suburban landscape or the hegemonic evacuation of it; it also effects these material phenomena at the level of aesthetic form. While his dramatic use of anaphora summons the "empty" schematic rhythms of both mass-production and the goods it produces in its image, his use of asyndeton—or the elimination of conjunctions in a list—allows

for a succession of appositive descriptions by which he defines the various uniform *parts* of the suburban landscape to blur into the stultifying image of a socio-geographical totality from which there is no escape whatsoever. And so, as I have already begun to suggest, the neat geometric patterns of identical tracts of housing that dominate the dominant iconography of suburbia more broadly—in both popular culture and art history—thereby come forward as a set of architectural signifiers that have been "emptied" of any particular aesthetic significance, only to serve instead as the subdivided elements of the ultimate trope of 20th-century totality under capitalism: the term "suburbia" itself.

Of course, if we take seriously Laclau's ontological reconfiguration of populist rhetoric, then we know that something more than just a hegemonic aesthetic is produced here: the image of a new hegemonic social totality, cut precisely to the generic measures of the white, middle-class people that notoriously inhabited this "empty but ineradicable place" on the landscape when the anxious aesthetic discourse of "suburbia" first emerged, comes into being along with it. Because suburbia serves as a "placeholder" for the people that make up a dominant portion of society in a decidedly more literal sense than most rhetorical structures do—it is in fact an aesthetic formation of material structures that *house* people—it would seem to serve as an inexhaustible architectural mechanism for producing hegemonic figurations of this same inscrutable social body. A *fortiori,* insofar as it constitutes a concrete geographical and architectural embodiment of the very same set of overlapping aesthetic relations that defines the hegemonic production of a "people" in Laclau's account —even lying *beyond* the geographical and arguably sociopolitical limits of representation that define the city a discrete entity of civic representation in its own right—we could legitimately go so far as to call it a people machine. Just as surely as it constitutes an industrial infrastructure for popular architecture, it constitutes a rhetorical infrastructure for the neverending hegemonic struggle to "ground" competing images of the "real, ordinary people" that make up society.

In this sense it is hardly surprising that the image of the suburban populace coincides so persistently with the hegemonic image of a "normal" white, middle-class family that the Eisenhower administration worked so hard to establish both *in* and *as* the popular imagination at the peak of the Cold War, using any number of different modes of political discourse. For although these modes of discourse would most certainly include the many rhetorical appeals to the "typical" American family that Eisenhower is famous for making in the realm of proper political rhetoric, I would venture that they should be understood to include as well the numerous policies and institutions that "grounded" the increasingly homogeneous rhetoric of suburbia in geography and discourse alike—the Federal Highway Act of 1956 chief among them. After all, if the hegemonic establishment of a new social body depends on the construction of an "empty but ineradicable" place in the existing terrain of political discourse, then a bulldozer would serve as an especially forceful writing instrument—one whose broad strokes signify more indelibly than the countless nuances that have been added to the picture more recently.

To regard the relation between suburbia, hegemony, and the popular imagination in this way is to recast entirely the terms of the problem with which we began. Perhaps first and foremost, it confirms that, however laudatory they may be, efforts to re-articulate the dominant image of suburbia as a social space actually *depend* on the very same conceit of suburban nonspace that they ostensibly work to displace in the popular imagination. For indeed, if suburbia exerts a seemingly endless appeal to artists and cultural producers seeking to re-imagine the hegemonic image of the "real, ordinary people" that implicitly populate it, it is only because the hegemonic image of a suburban landscape that is totally devoid of aesthetic particularity effectively structures this appeal in the first place. Consider, for instance, the prominent role that the aesthetic of serial display, which I described as taxonomic at the outset of this essay, has played in the work of artists and pop cultural producers seeking to re-articulate the image of suburbia—and I am thinking here of the photographic series I've discussed in the course of this essay, but also countless others, including

Ed Ruscha's iconic shots of parking lots, Peter Blake's influential shots of suburban development stages, and even the serial format of the classic television sitcom. Although each of these uses of seriality articulates the totality of suburbia in different terms, as Laclau's account of hegemony helps us to see, they all aspire to the very same exhaustive logic that totality promises, but fails, to secure. And in doing so, they not only reinscribe the logic of totality that most of them hope to critique or disrupt, but also help to structure its proliferation through alternative figurations that will replace theirs in turn. For the rhetoric of suburban non-space provides at once the image of an entrenched uniformity in need of hegemonic transformation and the mechanism of hegemonic transformation needed to displace it indefinitely.

It is perhaps for this reason above all that the phenomenon of non-space has played such a key role in producing the seemingly contradictory phenomenon of sprawl—on the terrain of the suburban landscape, to be sure, but also on the aesthetic and political terrain of the discourses and representational economies that help found it. Somewhere just beyond the existing limits of the dominant suburban iconography, just beyond the existing limits of the city, or just beyond the limits of the public and its privileged technologies of visibility, the image of a "people" unacknowledged, ignored, unrepresented, or disavowed by the current order forever promises—and just as often threatens—to appear. And in this sense, the smooth, stable texture of the terrain we associate with the phenomenon of suburban non-space must not be understood as the stuff of mere simulation or ideology, but it cannot be understood as the proof of any *actual* homogeneous totality either. Quite the contrary, it must be understood as the ontological condition of the eminently productive force that the trope "suburbia" exercises in the discursive domains of art and politics alike, and indeed, as one of the rare guarantors that the threat of a capitalist totality with which it has become associated in both of these domains, especially where they overlap, will remain a matter of ongoing hegemonic contest, rather than existential closure.

This way of understanding the relation between suburbia, hegemony, and the popular imagination also does a great deal to reframe the aesthetic anxieties that historically surround the trope of suburbia—in art and aesthetic theory, most of all, but also in the domain of the "popular imagination" that suburbia itself helps to embody. Perhaps most fundamentally, it suggests that, far from being empty of aesthetic interest, the notorious homogeneity of the suburbs in fact plays a constitutive role in the aesthetic articulation of political ontology. By extension, the iconography of suburbia in both art and popular culture demands not *less* attention to matters of aesthetic form, but rather, far *more* sensitivity to the distinctive social, political, and geographical formations that this iconography tends to coordinate from one figuration to the next. More simply put, when we speak of the "aesthetics" of suburbia, we need not only speak of the privileged aesthetic object of architectural analysis—a given building as such—but must also speak of the aesthetic relations that these objects, and the imagery that attends them, effectively structures in the inextricably linked domain of political discourse. After all, if we hope to make sense of the complex role that the image of suburbia inevitably seems to play in articulating the past and future of this discourse—and indeed, the past and future of our very own social existence—we will need to do more than disavow the existence of non-space. We will need to see it, and build it, with new eyes.

Caption

SHORT ESSAYS & IMAGES

By Emma Conner
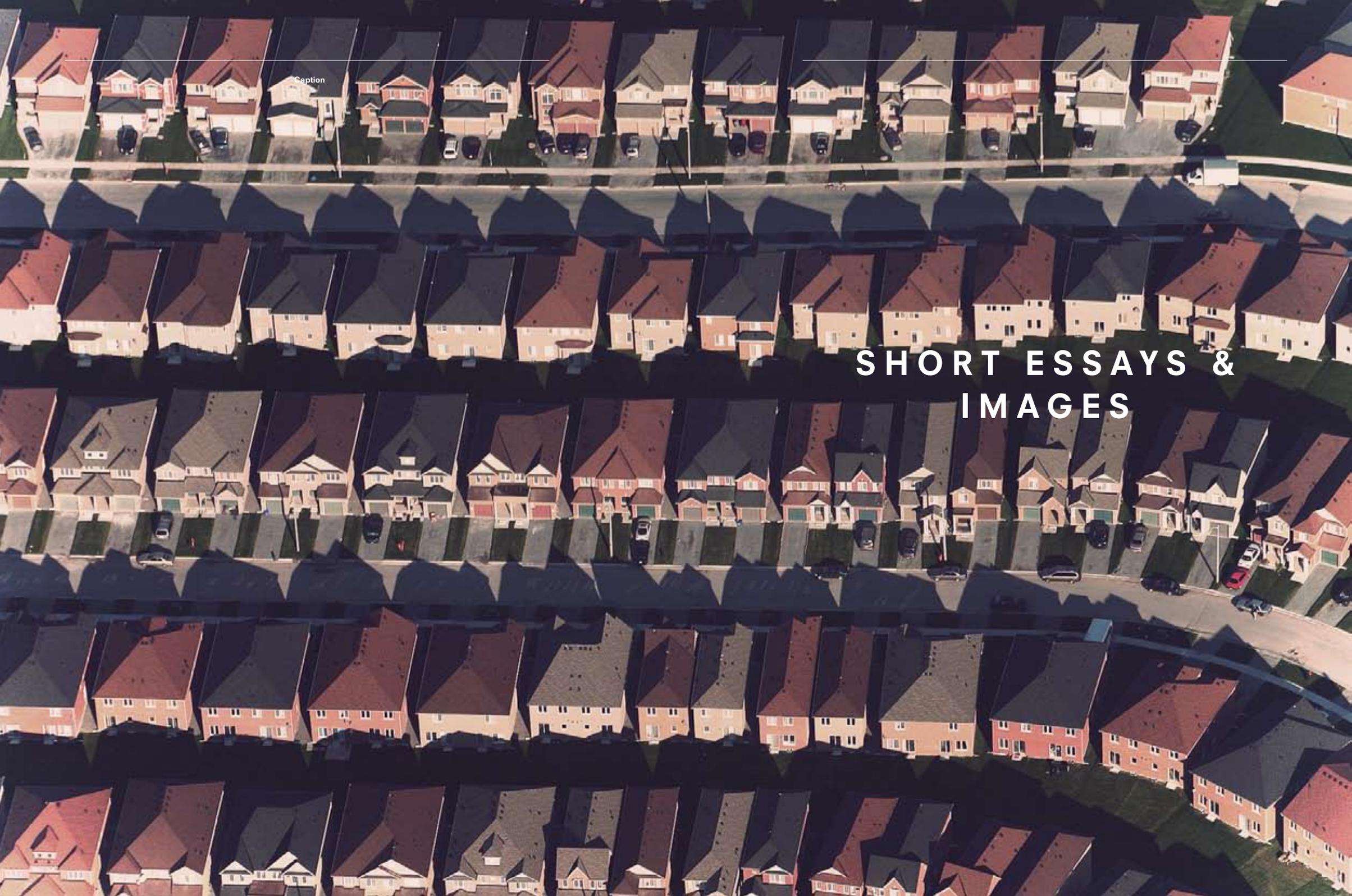
In *Avenida Ixtapaluca*, **Jordi Colomer** emphasizes the way we perceive urban landscapes, bringing attention to the underlying social conditions of urbanism and the modern enterprise of housing as they appear in Mexico. Documenting a low-income suburb on the outskirts of Mexico City, *Avenida Ixtapaluca* depicts the changing urban and social order that prevails in the city. As the camera pans across the suburban landscape, the viewer becomes aware of the scope of this development. Thousands of uniform blockhouses organized in a repetitive grid, appear well ordered and pristine. Only the pastel colours with which they are painted vary the exteriors of the rows of identical dwellings.

As the camera moves to ground level, the slight differentiation between houses comes into focus and we can see the architectural imperfections of this seemingly homogenous site. The camera then follows residents along a street, first focusing on a girl walking with a piñata that closely resembles the Disney character Buzz Lightyear. The piñata is passed to two girls and then passed once more to a man, implying an infinite relay down a street within a seemingly endless suburb. The camera returns to its bird's eye perspective with the man and the piñata still in view continuing down the road. Uniformity and repetition interweave with difference and distinctness.

Colomer's video queries the belief that suburban developments can create or sustain the order and social cohesion dependent on the hegemonic structure of the nuclear family. We see instead an urban development where the population subverts this order. The poverty and abandoned homes disrupts the seamless seriality of the development. A viewer, unfamiliar with the urban lands of Mexico, may find the scene of identical dwellings distant from the comfortable North American middle-class utopia of the detached house and garden. **Colomer's** work encourages observers to contemplate their roles in the production of the social situations depicted in this piece.

Commissioned by the Varley Art Gallery, *Show Us Your Unionville!* explores the everyday individual relationships that exist within a suburban community. Artists **Brette Gabel** and **Robin Lambert** invite residents of Unionville to breakfast, talking about their connections with the city and their personal history with the area. Not originally from this suburb community, the artists offer a ritual morning meal to learn about the city in an intimate manner. Asking residents what their favourite parts of the city are, **Gabel** and **Lambert** discuss the hidden gems of the city over the informal format of breakfast. The two artists first met in Regina, Saskatchewan, and got to know each other, and the city they had both moved to, over breakfast. They cite this time as the foundation for their long friendship, and it is this moment that serves as a method by which the two explore new sites.

Using the insider's perspective offered by the residents at breakfast, **Gabel** and **Lambert** continue their work by embarking on a journey to explore the suggested sites. Like a kind of insider itinerary, the artists explore the city as tourists, but are guided by a personal connection imparted to them. They explore the city as site. **Gabel** and **Lambert** document their journey using photographs, writing, found paraphernalia and sound recordings made throughout the process. Specifically, the sound recordings are featured in a podcast made by **Gabel** and **Lambert** who use these as platforms to reflect on the experience of getting to know a new city and the people that live in it. Hosted by the Varley Art Gallery's website, the podcast functions as documentation of the performance and as a secondary site of connectivity. Similarly, **Gabel** and **Lambert** produce posters as a visual document of their journey, and display them in the exhibition space.

Gabel and **Lambert** are continuing in string of larger explorations of communities. Previously enacted in Edmonton as *Show Us Your Edmonton!*, in *Cul-de-sac*, the artists bring their ongoing project, an exploration of personal relationships of place and community, to Unionville.

In the series *Model Homes*, **Isabelle Hayeur** presents portraits of 21st-century suburban living. **Hayeur** photographs homes in suburban neigh-bourhoods, as well as model homes from one of the largest prefabricated housing manufacturers in Montréal. Digitally altering the photographs, **Hayeur** isolates elements from the suburban models, assembling a hybrid construction that she then re-contextualizes in a virtual landscape.[1] For **Hayeur**, the standardized construction of model homes offers the oppor-tunity to reflect on the sprawl of homogenized community developments.

Hayeur targets the practice of customization of prefabricated homes by giving a female name to each model in the series. Assigning a model home with a female moniker is a common practice in the field of suburban development.[2] Like models at a boat or car show, females entice viewer-ship through seduction. **Hayeur** suggests a critical position as the title appears in conflict with monstrous examples of suburban sprawl.

Virginia pictures a house in transition; the front façade embodies both dilapidated farmhouse and suburban ideal. This mutation parallels the antagonistic relationship between the pre-fabricated aesthetic of model homes and the landscape that preceded it. Sections of the front are re-covered in materials typical of suburban architecture; beige siding complemented with burgundy roofing anchors the transformative pro-cess. However, the original exterior betrays the idealism of *Virginia's* camouflage. **Hayeur's** composite portrait reflects on the schismatic rela-tionship between the pre-history of a site and the superimposition of a standardized aesthetic.

Challenging the idealizing rhetoric of suburban development, **Hayeur** associates ruination and dilapidation with the constructed identity of suburban architecture. The models of suburban living **Hayeur** presents for reflection appear abandoned and unfinished in a landscape emptied of human life. **Hayeur** asks: how does the postmodern pastiche sustain our desire for the modernist dreamscape?

1 Serge Bérard, Inhabiting: the works of Isabelle Hayeur (Oakville, Ontario: Oakville Galleries, 2006), 12.

2 Isabelle Hayeur, "Model Homes (2004-2007)," http://isabellehayeur.com/photos/maisons_modeles/index_en.html.

By Ekaterina Kotikova

Toronto-based artist **Laurie Kang**, in her photographic series *Suburban Romance*, documents a Toronto suburb. **Kang** documents the familiar places of a neighbourhood in which she grew up. As a result her photographs invest fleeting glances of common suburban sites with profound personal meaning.

Laurie Kang photographs everyday suburbia devoid of its inhabitants: a plane in the sky, a row of houses dividing the horizon, uniform postal boxes, a driveway, a groomed tree placed in the front yard, or a couple of fences where one is perfectly rigid while the other is balancing on hilly ground. In these photographs, **Kang** approaches the suburb as a place that invites but cannot sustain conformity. The contemporary suburb is an imaginary locale, invented by society in order for people to feel safe among their belongings and invigorated by the semblance of normality. **Kang** captures moments when this normality becomes remarkable. The unpopulated photographs document the inanimate objects that remain —the abandoned basketball stand kisses the ground and a house photographed from below opens its windowed mouth in a ravenous grin. These photographs provide a glimpse at instances when the tension between the natural and human-made elements and between the inanimate and the animate become palpable. This hyperrealism is accentuated by the gently sloping hills, sunny spots of light, and the contrast between the idyllic and the flawed moments of the suburban landscape. Her views are emblematic of lived experience, messy and meaningful.

The landscaped yards sensuously envelope the neighbourhood in these photographs. The earth pushes against its imposed boundaries. It attempts to upend the white fence of suburbia, trying to escape or return to the idyllic openness of the field. Each element in this suburban landscape is altered by human presence even as the natural elements, the trees and the grassy knolls, push against the artificial boundaries or co-exist with them as a snapshot of a *Suburban Romance*.

Kelly Mark's *REM* (2007) is like the kind of dream one has late at night after falling asleep in front of the TV. Created using source footage **Mark** recorded from her television set, the video appears, upon first encountering the piece, to be a Hollywood movie or television program. Yet, beneath this appearance, something seems broken, as the narratives of mass media to which we are so accustomed go unfulfilled. Instead, *REM* presents us with something akin to a stream of consciousness, progressing in much the same way as a dream: absurdly, but according to an inner logic of its own.

To create the work, **Mark** undertook a rigorous schedule of watching TV, recording a total of 170 different shows and movies throughout a four-month period in 2007. She then reviewed and categorized the recorded footage, methodically sorting and splicing scenes of congruent content and structure. The result is an amalgam of paradigmatic scenes—interrogation scenes, driving-in-a-car scenes, and explosion scenes, to name a few—no longer arranged according to their original narratives but to a logic that reveals the repetition inherent in film and television.

The video is played on an ordinary TV, installed among the accoutrements of an average living room: a sofa, coffee table, rug, and wall clock. These basic furnishings could be in the living room of any suburban home, as we can also imagine so many of the scenes of *REM* playing on the television sets in these spaces.

REM compresses what would be almost a year's worth of TV-watching into a little over two hours, **Mark** having done the work of watching for us. The resulting effect is like when you fall asleep, live a lifetime in a dream, then wake up and realize it's only been five minutes.

In the video work *Homewrecker* (2001), **Alex Morrison** skateboards through an uninhabited apartment, highlighting a structure in transition. The space through which he skates appears to have been previously lived in; marks are evident on the walls, indicating where objects were hung for a length of time. These traces demarcate the life of previous occupants and belongings that are no longer present. **Morrison** glides on his skateboard from room to room in khakis and a zip-up hoodie—ZERO, branded prominently across the chest. A reference to a skateboard company, ZERO thereby associates **Morrison** as part of a larger skate culture.

The space in *Homewrecker* is bare aside from **Morrison** and a few other objects: his skateboard and the structures he uses in his performance. The rooms that **Morrison** skates through are painted in bright, primary colours: red, yellow and blue. Through his performance, **Morrison** transforms the empty rooms of an apartment into a site of sport. He utilizes plywood as a ramp. In the kitchen, he creates obstacles, using an oven door left ajar, as well as a large piece of metal, perhaps a table frame tipped on its side.

Homewrecker depicts illegal occupation by way of performance; it problematizes the issues of ownership over transitional spaces. The performance investigates the politics of appropriating space, positing the question: does use constitute ownership? The viewer is not provided with an answer to this question, instead one watches as **Morrison** explores the site by engaging in an active intervention. He does this by bringing an outdoor activity—skateboarding—indoors. He brings a recreational endeavour meant for open expanses, into a confined space. In a way, this speaks to an adolescent transgression of boundaries. It is a disregard for authority that can be understood as an assertion and reclamation of territory.

A parallel engagement with spatial occupation informs *Every House I've Ever Lived In (Drawn from Memory)* (1999–2002). This series of 33 pencil on paper drawings presents structural, architectural renderings of

living spaces: apartments, houses, and rooms. Like *Homewrecker*, the rooms are empty. The spaces are ephemeral as their existence is a recollection extracted from **Morrison's** mind, and does not come from a source accessible to the viewer. The viewer may wonder if all of the sketched homes are ones that **Morrison** has in fact lived in, or alternately, if some of them are conceptualized fictions. When asked about his familiarity with the regional design of Vancouver Island, specifically Victoria, **Morrison** mentions that he grew up in a structurally significant home – a home designed by Arts and Crafts architect Samuel Maclure.[1] Perhaps **Morrison's** close relationship with a regionally significant building and its place in a historical narrative influenced **Morrison's** relationship to his surroundings, and consequently future negotiations of constructed locales in his artistic practice.

Alex Morrison's personal negotiations with domestic spaces investigate perceptions of habitation manifested in physical and psychological residual traces. **Morrison's** works present a visual record of transition, situating himself within the spatial flux of rental units, abandoned houses, and new developments. *Homewrecker* (2001) epitomizes **Morrison's** ability to territorialize unclaimed spaces through personal intervention, and *Every House I've Ever Lived in Drawn From Memory* (2002) manages the memorializing of spaces no longer intimately accessible.

Alex Morrison
Every House I've Ever Lived In (Drawn from Memory), 1999 – 2002

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1 Alex Morrison, interview by Brad Phillips, *Hunter and Cook,* no. 4 (2009): 44.
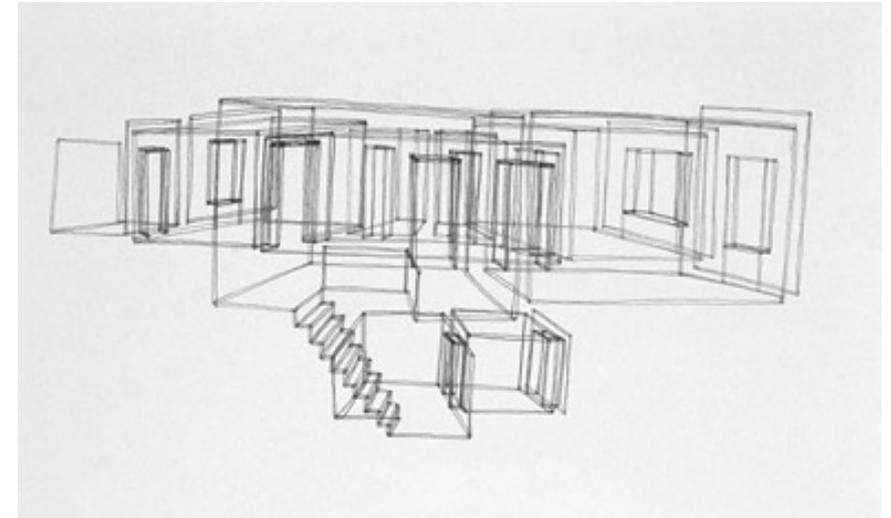
Jordi Colomer (Spain; Video/Multimedia Installation)
Since 2001, Jordi Colomer's multimedia practice (combining photography, video and installation) investigates the urban space as a theatre where social situations occur and overlap in response to contemporary life in a given space and time. Through his work, the artist journeys into these situations —moving in and out of isolated actions and interacting with characters—to reflect (sometimes with a certain degree of absurd humour) on the possibilities of poetic survival in the contemporary metropolis. Colomer's work can be described as "expanded theatre," as it prompts viewers to consider their roles in the production of the social situations visualized in his work.

The variety of mediums used in Jordi Colomer's work to explore the intersections of space is without a doubt linked to his education as an architect, artist and art historian in the politically and socially progressive city of Barcelona in the 1980s. In particular, Colomer uses video to fuse and intersect his interest in sculpture, the architecture of space, and theatrical staging. As such, Colomer is able to superimpose theatrical space into his work, which turns his video installations into inhabitable virtual sculptures that incorporate cinematographic micro-narration. Receiving international acclaim for his work *Anarchitekton* (2002–2004) he has exhibited widely throughout the EU and the Americas, including the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia (Madrid), Laboratoria de Arte Alameda (Mexico City) and the Museum of Contemporary art (Detroit, USA), Jeu de Paume (Paris). He participated in events such as the 9th Havana Biennale and Nuit Blanche (Paris). Jordi Colomer is represented by the Michel Rein Gallery (Paris).

Brette Gabel and Robin Lambert (Alberta; Performance/Multimedia)
Brette Gabel and Robin Lambert are two artists who met while living in Regina, Saskatchewan. Their friendship and basis for artistic collaboration was forged around their shared love for early morning breakfast. By starting their days together, they shared their feelings about the present and future while learning about each other's pasts. Breakfast, the first meal of the day, provided them with the platform to cultivate their relationship. In the summer of 2010, Gabel and Lambert worked together to create *Show Us Your Portland!* (May 2010), an artistic collaboration between the artists and the public and site-specific social intervention. This work was performed again in for *Visualeyez,* Canada's Annual Festival of Performance Art Show in Edmonton but was specifically entitled, *Show Us Your Edmonton!* (September 2010). *Show Us Your Unionville!* (June 2011) is the third installation of this site-specific social intervention.

Brette Gabel is a graduate of the University of Regina with a B.A. Honours in Theatre Studies and a minor in Visual Arts. Following her graduation, Gabel moved to Toronto where she participated in the Toronto School of Art's Independent Studio Program. Through her involvement in the program she became a contributing member to the White House Studio as well as a volunteer at the Textile Museum of Canada. Her work lies primarily in performance and textile design. However her artistic endeavors are not restricted to any one medium. She has shown textile works in various group shows in Regina, including the *Consistent Variable Project II* (2005). She has produced, directed, and designed a horror play titled *Emily* (2007), curated a show for the Fifth Parallel art gallery (Regina, Saskatchewan), and was the resident designer for Hecktic Theatre. Gabel has spent the last year as the University of Regina's artist in residence. Through her work in social practice, performance, and textiles, Gabel explores how the threads of social experience can

ease the tensions and discomforts within our social fabric.

Robin Lambert is a socially engaged artist and educator, whose work has been exhibited in Canada, the US, and Australia. He earned a B.F.A from the Alberta College of Art and Design and an M.F.A from the University of Regina. He has received numerous grants and awards for his socially engaged work including the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Masters Grant, and the Alberta Creative Development Initiative Grant. He has recently won a Red Deer Mayoral Recognition Award.

Lambert's theoretical and studio interests include: relational aesthetics, participatory work, art and craft theory, craft culture, and the roles of the artist and of the art object. Lambert's work is often a simple gesture highlighting something that may not be fully appreciated until it is explored. Daydreaming, napping, letter writing, and sharing dinner are some of his tools. Lambert has stated that he regards art as more than objects, ideas or actions in a gallery. For him, art can offer something particular; it is empathetic toward the audience and through the audience, the world.

Kelly Mark (Toronto, ON; Video/Installation)
Based in Toronto, Kelly Mark is an artist working in a variety of media including: drawing, sculpture, photography, installation, sound, multiples, video and public interventions. Her practice addresses the pathos and the humour found in the quotidian and mundane environments of everyday life. Hidden within these environments are startling moments of poetic individuation and an imprint of the individual within the commonplace rituals of society. Her objective is the investigation, documentation and validation of these singular 'marked' and 'unmarked' moments of our lives.

Mark completed a B.F.A (w/ a Minor in Art History) in 1994 at the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design (N.S.C.A.D.). Since then, she has exhibited widely across

Canada and internationally. Some venues include the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa), the Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto), the Power Plant (Toronto), and the Musée d'Art Contemporain (Montreal). She represented Canada at the Sydney Biennale (1998) and the Liverpool Biennale (2006). She is the recipient of numerous Canada Council, Ontario Arts Council and Toronto Arts Council grants; as well as the KM Hunter Artist Award (2002), and Chalmers Art Fellowship (2002).

Isabelle Hayeur (Montreal, QC; Photography)
Isabelle Hayeur is best known for her large-scale photomontages, her videos, and her site-specific installations. She holds a B.F.A (1996) and a M.F.A (2002) from the Université du Québec in Montréal. Her artistic practice is centered on video and large-format photography in which she critiques recent urban and environmental upheavals. Hayeur constantly strives to highlight the ambivalence of our relation to the world.

Isabelle Hayeur's work has been widely shown throughout Canada, Europe, and the U.S.. Furthermore, she has exhibited in Mexico, Argentina, Turkey, and Japan. She has had solo exhibitions at Le Maillon-Wacken au Hall 3, (2009, Strasbourg, France), the New York Photography Festival 2008 (Brooklyn, US), Musée National des Beaux-arts du Québec (2008, Quebec City, Canada), Oakville Galleries (Oakville, Canada), and the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Arts (2004, North Adams, US). Her photographs are found in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, the Fonds National d'Art Contemporain (FNAC), the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal, the Musée National des Beaux-arts du Québec, Oakville Galleries and of the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago.

Laurie Kang (Toronto, ON; Film Photography/Collage/Sculpture)
Laurie Kang is an emerging Toronto artist who explores the construction and the

staging of the world through film, photography, collage, and sculpture. Kang's artwork draws from real and fictional scenarios to create new and ambiguous surrealities. Her strong imagination and keen sense of colour and shape entices viewers to re-examine their relationships to, and within familiar spaces.

Kang's artwork has been exhibited widely at galleries within Canada, including Tinku Gallery (Toronto, ON), Roberts Street Social Centre (Halifax, NS), Lowercase Gallery (Vancouver, BC), Art Mur (Montreal) and most recently at Gallery 44 (Toronto, ON). Still early in her career, Kang has already worked with such prominent artists as German artist Candice Breitz. Kang was a participant in Breitz' *Factum Kang/Same Same* art project at the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto (2009). She was also commissioned by Breitz to create a collaborative video work entitled *Face to Face* (2009) with artist Hanna Hur. She is a dynamic artist and a fast-growing presence on the international art scene who has been the recipient of many artist residencies and awards such as the Sparkbox Studio Residency (Picton, ON), and the Magenta's Flash Forward Emerging Canadian Photographer award. She was recently awarded a grant to extend her practice to Berlin.

Alex Morrison (Vancouver, BC; Photography/Video)
word count: 167 needs approval from artist/dealer
 The British-born Alex Morrison is identified on the international scene as a Vancouver-based artist known for his documentation of skater culture. As a participant of this lifestyle Morrison brings into the arena of art the rebellious politics of this subculture. As such, much of his work addresses the structural constraints of social behaviour. His videos, performances and drawings act to disturb the invisible and delicate rules of engagement of the cultural domain.

He has exhibited nationally and internationally. He has had solo exhibitions at Artspeak (2010, Vancouver, BC), Buro Friedrich (2005, Berlin, Germany), Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington (2004, Seattle, WA), and Mercer Union Gallery (2000, Toronto, ON). Additionally, He has participated in important group exhibitions, such as Melanchotopia at the Witte de With (2011, Rotterdam, NL), It is What it Is at the National Gallery of Canada (2010, Ottawa, ON), and the 2010 Sydney Biennale.

Morrison's work has been written about in books, magazines and periodicals including Our Changing Landscape: Perspectives on and Interpretations of British Columbia (2010), Informal Architectures: Space in Contemporary Cultures (2008), and Frieze Magazine (Summer 2007). Morrison has also published essays in a number of publications including Public 21, C Magazine, and Mix Magazine.

Jordi Colomer, *Avenida Ixtapaluca (Houses for Mexico)*, 2009. Video and projection room. Master HD 6' loop, sound. Courtesy of Galerie Michel Rein, Paris

Brette Gabel and Robin Lambert, *Show Us Your Unionville!*, 2011. Interactive community project and installation. Commissioned by the Varley Art Gallery

Isabelle Hayeur, *Ellen*, 2005. From the Model Homes series (2004–2007). Digital colour photograph. Courtesy of the artist

Isabelle Hayeur, *Linda*, 2006. From the Model Homes series (2004–2007). Digital colour photograph. Courtesy of the artist

Isabelle Hayeur, *Tiffany*, 2005. From the Model Homes series (2004–2007). Digital colour photograph. Courtesy of the artist

Isabelle Hayeur, *Virginia*, 2005. From the Model Homes series (2004–2007). Digital colour photograph. Courtesy of the artist

Laurie Kang, *Untitled*, from the series Suburban Romance, 2009–2010. Digital C-print. Courtesy of the artist

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Laurie Kang, *Untitled*, from the series Suburban Romance, 2009–2010. Digital C-print. Courtesy of the artist

Kelly Mark, *REM*, 2007. Video installation, 2h 15m 30s. Courtesy of the artist.

Alex Morrison, *Every House I've Ever Lived In (Drawn from Memory)*, 1999–2002. Graphite on wove paper Overall (each of 33 sheets). 50.9×66.3 cm (20 1/16× 26 1/8 in.)

Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, *Toronto*, purchased with financial support of Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance program and with funds donated by AGO Members, 2003.

Alex Morrison, *Homewrecker*, 2001. Colour DVD, 1 min 54 sec, loop. Courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery

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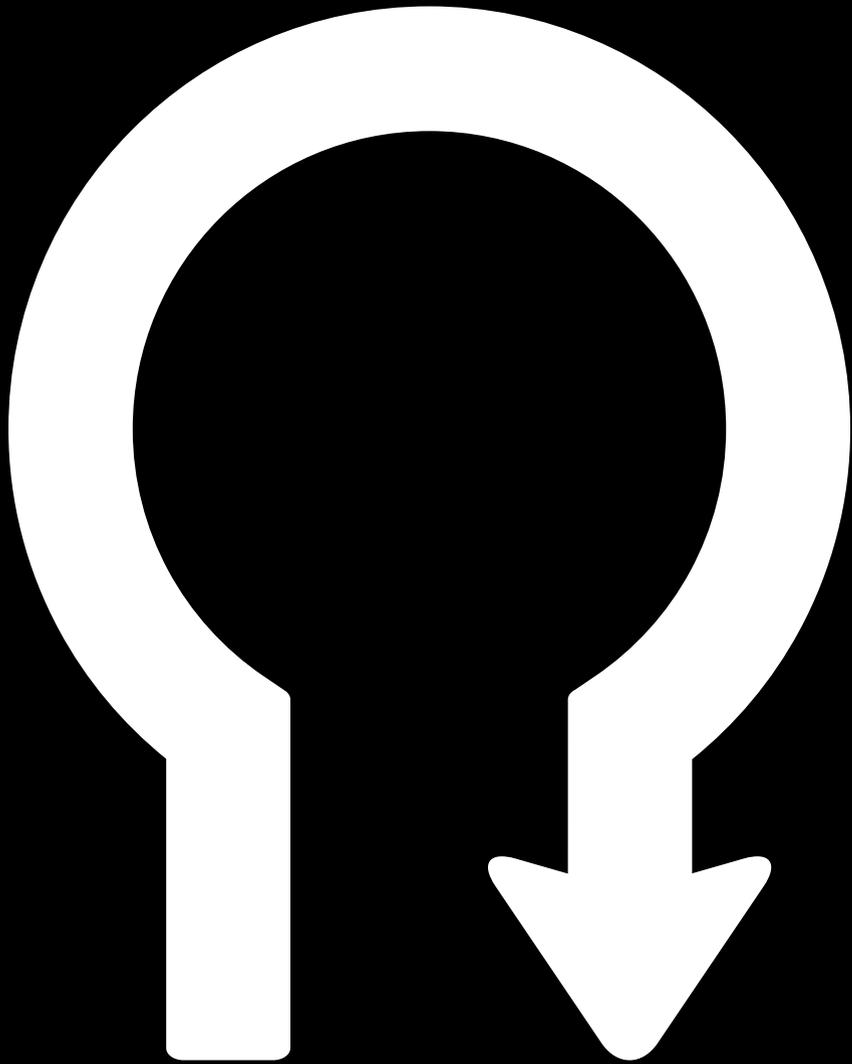
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