

J O H N M A R R I O T T



Curated by  
Philip Monk

The Power Plant – Contemporary Art Gallery at Harbourfront Centre  
27 June – 8 September 1996

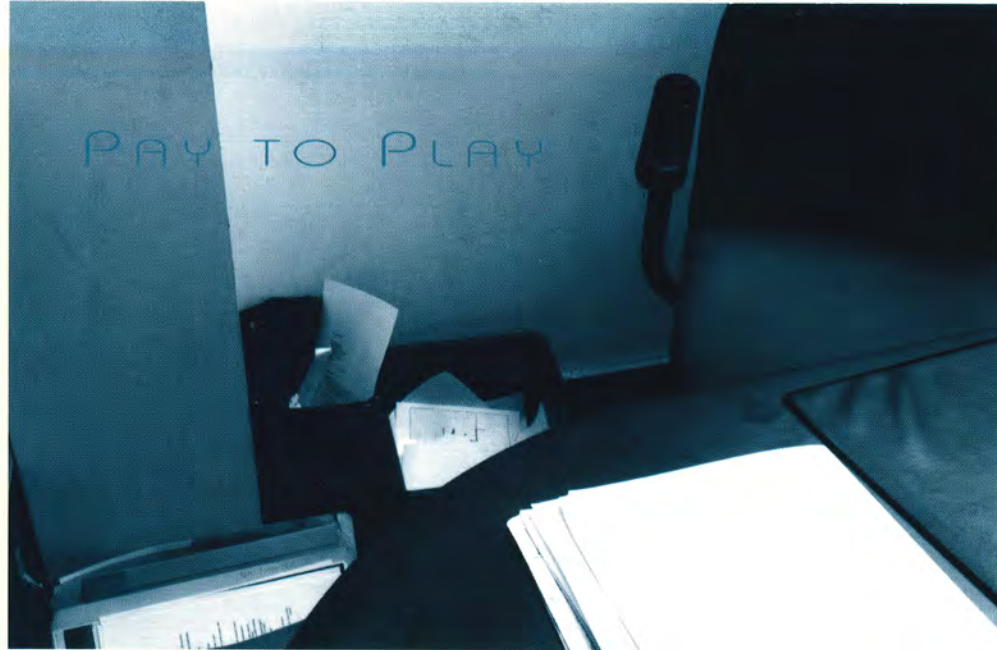
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## Faxworks

PHILIP MONK

In an office in the heart of Toronto's financial district, at the base of one of its signature bank towers that mirrors the power and authority of the corporate world to itself, John Marriott, working as a graphic designer for a blue-chip investment firm, sends a fax proposing a work for his exhibition at The Power Plant to the curator, Philip Monk. One of many sent as art-world jokes to relieve the intellectual distress of wage labour, this fax uncertainly enters into the domain of negotiation between artist and curator.

Receiving this fax in his office at The Power Plant, Contemporary Art Gallery at Harbourfront Centre – an eighties industrial reno in the heart of a popular, publicly funded multi-cultural entertainment site – Philip Monk chuckles and adds it to his collection of Marriott *bon mots*. Will this proposal, sketched on a computer, be fabricated and displayed in the exhibition, or will it remain suspended in its hazy status as an incomplete artwork or as a joke? The artist proposes, but the curator disposes.



Detail Philip Monk's office – The Power Plant

Critique of the mainstream ennobles the therapeutic institution's ostensible role as shadow government and disguises its unacknowledged mandate to neutralize dissent by first ghettoizing it, and then mystifying it. Confronted by images like Mapplethorpe's that, by virtue of their direct appeal to the beholder, disdain its umbrella of "care," the therapeutic institution is immediately disclosed for what it is: the moral junkyard of a pluralistic civilization.

Dave Hickey, "Enter the Dragon"

## NEGOTIATIONS

John Marriott investigates the way images are presented by various institutions – museums, the media, corporations – and what values are thereby implicit. In particular, his objects and images examine the ways power is manifested in the devices and forms of presentation we may not pay attention to. The knowledge that such forms purvey invisibly substantiates institutions' positions of power and assists in our taking their authority

for granted.

Such is the case here, given Marriott's exhibition in a contemporary art gallery, The Power Plant. In this presentation, John Marriott wishes to implicate all parties involved, from the artist to the curator to the spectator. A neutral space for presentation, the white cube of the gallery subtly reproduces its own understanding of art, and the staff inevitably displays art that supports its curatorial agenda. This manipulation is all



Detail  
Philip Monk's office – The Power Plant

the more pertinent to the catalogue, where it falls upon the curator to fit the artist to his own intellectual discourse.

In any exhibition, it is assumed that artist and curator share agendas, and that in presenting an artist to view, the curator stands behind him or her in articulating the objectives of the work in a catalogue. Even given their different institutional positions – one inside and the other out – artists and curators, it is presumed, still share assumptions that bind them in a common goal and understanding (a presumption that extends even to their political leanings). Although it is left to the artist to perform in this arena of public display, we know that the curator's standing behind the artist masks a power differential between the two. The artist must operate within institutional constraints, not the least of which is the authority of the curator. In a reversal of this submission, the artist, who is also a graphic designer, has designed this publication as an extension of his exhibition, and specifically in a

format that investigates and thwarts the convergence, as John Marriott proposes, between design and institutional narratives. Working from his position as a graphic designer in the corporate world qualifies Marriott, moreover, in that the corporation becomes something of a model of the institution for him. His position also gives Marriott the knowledge to manipulate the forms of corporate expression and the daily experience to understand the ethos of corporate life.

Taking the forms and contents of the corporate world and aligning them with the institutional

crossed with the languages, references, and forms of presentation of other disciplines of communication. That his "critique" of the corporate worlds of business and art takes place within the secure precinct of an art gallery raises a curatorial **caveat**: what distinguishes Marriott's project from Dave Hickey's above claim that the therapeutic institution – by which he means the typical contemporary art gallery or museum – is "the moral junkyard of a pluralistic civilization"? Is it enough to put different languages in dialogue with

### "the moral junkyard of a pluralistic civilization"?

domain of art objects underlines the languages they share. This commonality may be more an underpinning of art by business which expresses the real values of society and the imbalance of power between the two. The images and objects of John Marriott's art are thus criss-

crossed with the languages, references, and forms of presentation of other disciplines of communication. That his "critique" of the corporate worlds of business and art takes place within the secure precinct of an art gallery raises a curatorial **caveat**: what distinguishes Marriott's project from Dave Hickey's above claim that the therapeutic institution – by which he means the typical contemporary art gallery or museum – is "the moral junkyard of a pluralistic civilization"? Is it enough to put different languages in dialogue with

## ARTIFACTS

The postmodernist assault on the aura of art has been more than successful, with its arguments having entered even into the works themselves. With the withering away of art's aura, unfortunately for artists, has gone the **belief** in art, a belief that is the legacy of Romanticism: the belief in art as (morally) good for you, with the artist as guiding genius. With the loss of belief in the **meaning** of art as a **value**, art's general function for society disappears and its status is delegitimized, although, like all exemplars of lost legitimacy, it maintains a long half-life. And so goes its audience, as well – the public that was never completely won over by the Enlightenment educational project carried on by modernism. To entertain its audience is one of the lingering functions

of art, a job demanding that it speak to its viewers in a language that its audience understands and that does not speak down in a lecturing voice, as a hectoring critique. Visual art may no longer be the domain to develop its own unique language, as modernism attempted, but a place to mix languages, as Marriott proposes. Using the languages of corporate architecture and design, of advertising and the media, enables Marriott to address his audience through the fabricated visual reality they have experienced, though not necessarily consciously remarked. Yet at times his works, too, have the look of demonstrations: the lecture set-up of **Critical Tragedy** – an analysis of the co-opted sign systems of rebellion – stages this didacticism in the most overt manner. (The works' making, in their hands-off approach by the artist –

designed, shipped out, and manufactured by others – further depletes the organic unity that traditionally sustained art's aura.) If these demonstrations function as propositions, they do so only by unravelling themselves. The spectator is key to this process. As the artist has stated, "The process of spectatorship – especially in the face of spectacles whose auras appear somehow unfixed, fluid or faltering – becomes a ghost in the work. The conditions of nagging doubt become a window."

If works of art no longer sustain belief on behalf of their participants, if they are no longer privileged sites of communion and communication, all the same they are a special category of artifacts. Put together in different combinations from diverse elements – words, images, and objects – they function much

like advertising, except we don't quite know what product is being promoted. John Marriott further makes it difficult because his art does not communicate his intent but rather that of others. An art that is based on codes of communication, it reveals intentions that other producers

wish hidden behind their messages. It is not as if there is necessarily anything duplicitous in this activity of others that requires it to be unmasked in a critique that arrogates for itself a morally righteous attitude. These are communications we participate in every day, as producers and recipients, as part of the everyday commerce of life in the modern world.

Language users are sophisticated – the very capacity for language suggests so. We all are media savvy and are able to code and decode the complex cultural references

around us that are continually disseminated by advertising and the media. In spite of this, no communication is secure in delivering its message or ensuring the use to which it is subsequently put; no language communication is straightforward

in its reception. Nonetheless, corporations pay big money for advertising and design to define their identities and create their market niche.

For John Marriott, the work of art is an artifact burdened with contradictory cultural codes. Some of these codes are sustained while others are suppressed whenever artifacts are made public. Shared across institutional domains of presentation, from art to advertising, from boardrooms to political platforms, these codes determine the choice, look, and function of Marriott's objects on display here. Actually, sustaining one set of values

while suppressing others usually occurs at the same time, even if the suppression is unconscious. By bringing two sets of values together and by forcing their contradictions, John Marriott wants to make the mechanism of suppression as well as

elevation more obvious.

These mechanisms imply different operations. Marriott's works are organized as if around two axes. The first axis is that of "upper and lower," corresponding to the operation that takes place in elevation or suppression. The second axis is that of "inside and outside," aligning to the act of separating by inclusion or exclusion. Value judgements attach to each of the spatial terms of the two axes. We recognize in this translation from an act into a judgement the implicit ideological functions underlying the straight-forward facts of definition and display.

### If these demonstrations function as propositions,

You tell me your history, I'll tell  
you mine emphatically engages the  
first of these operations (elevation  
/ suppression, while also invoking the  
second, inclusion / exclusion) and uses  
the museum – and its representative  
here, The Power Plant – as its testing  
ground. Every detail of this work

they do so only by unravelling themselves.

mimics displays found in museums:  
everything is done to set the  
object apart from the world and  
the depredations of time in order  
to heighten its preciousness and  
uniqueness. This is accomplished by a  
series of nested enclosures, starting  
from its own theatrically lit room, a  
stepped plinth, and its own climate-  
controlled display case. This  
apparatus is actually a beverage  
refrigerator. Absurdly, irreverently,  
it houses a deep-fried Grecian urn.  
Rather than debasing the ideal, this  
work asks, What stands for culture?  
Why are some objects worthy of  
veneration and others not? And  
how do these become signifiers  
of culture? Why are deep-fried



Detail Philip Monk's office – The Power Plant





calamari or tempura exotic and doughnuts or fish and chips trash?

The Grecian urn has come to represent an ideal type of beauty, synonymous with the ideal time of classical Greek antiquity. Yet the urn had its origin as a utilitarian object, an amphora vessel, a simple container basically equivalent to our tin cans or glass jars. The more distanced from use, the more decorative it became, until it stood for a work of art, exalted, for example, in the famous poem by the Romantic poet John Keats, "Ode On a Grecian Urn." Now a mass-produced artifact, this particular urn – although we cannot see it beneath the deep-frying – presumably would be considered

The "beaded bubbles winking at the brim" (*pace* Keats) of Marriott's urn are produced by the deep-frying associated with the fast food of mass culture in modern democracies.

Even using all the devices of museology, can this display raise that which is considered base to the position of the ideal? **You tell me...** really asks the question, Why your history and not mine? The operations of elevation and suppression, inclusion and exclusion in effect here really participate in the language – in the vernacular of the marketplace – of winners and losers. Marriott's title promises an equal exchange, but will it deliver on its second half after

while appearing open is a common bureaucratic or corporate tactic. The appearance of transparency really marks boundaries – whether those of presumed competence (in the case of institutions) or of property relations (in the case of corporations). Transparency, then, is one of the ideological markers separating inside from outside, the second axis manifested in Marriott's works.

The three mirrors of **Morality Play** allude to the glass curtain wall ubiquitous inside and outside modern architecture, in shops, malls, banks, and offices. A mirror offers a surface or opens an illusionistic space, only differing from glass in reflecting the space in front of

reproduced as vinyl decals in a manner and position corresponding to the graphic devices that are used on glass walls, often a repetition of the logo of the company. In buildings, this device delineates the wall, in order to prevent us from walking into it, while making the space behind it transparent to view: an architectural metaphor for the ease of transactions within.

The form of transaction represented by these cheques, however, carries the stigma of shame: the label to the work informs us that they are welfare cheques. So the funhouse-mirror distortions of this work take on a sinister aspect that subdues the typical embarrassed laughter that

## Maintaining control while appearing open is a common bureaucratic or corporate tactic.

kitsch, a debasement in itself exemplifying class differences even more flagrant in the connotations of deep-frying,

the first history is revealed? Or will its titular interlocutor maintain control by remaining silent? Maintaining control

it rather than revealing that behind. Across each of **Morality Play's** mirrored surfaces is a band of cheques. They are

usually greets its reflections. (There is a "bread and circuses" topicality to this work because of its making and display in

welfare-reform Ontario, but the curator will refrain from adding his obligatory political comment to the morality play of art criticism.) As in most of the other works by Marriott, there are quotations from past art that reinforce the contemporary content – specifically allusions here to the sometimes oppressive and aggressive architecturally oriented Minimalist sculpture associated with Donald Judd and Robert Morris, an art coincidentally that younger American artists immediately criticized for its too-close approximation of corporate architecture and co-optation by commerce. (Aside from the fortuitousness of the names that aggrandize a free-market Darwinism shared by both publications referred to, **Geometric Intervention: Fortune Magazine and Soldier of Fortune Magazine** draws parallels between Modernist

or Minimalist painting, such as that by Frank Stella, and corporate design. Derogatorily known as "lobby art" when purchased to decorate corporate foyers, this art became no more than advertising for its institutional purchasers. By means of its format and presentation, **Geometric Interventions** advertises the commonality between, on the one hand, these magazines – and the emblems they thereby become, mythologizing their dual mercenary traits as natural – and on the other hand, commerce and art.)

If **You tell me your history, I'll tell you mine** excavates the mechanisms by which one object is elevated over another, and **Morality Play** reveals the dynamics separating inside from outside, **Bed of Pickets** combines the two on the individual, rather than institutional, level. Here is the

archetypal American symbol for private property, the benign white picket fence, separating what is mine from what is yours, as well as guarding cultural, and racial, sameness. Fences fencing fences, the serried ranks of this work possess the irrational logic of

### Rather than delivering blows against

Sol Lewitt's abstract cubes and grids, but now the sublimation of the capitalist and Cartesian grid is of an ascetic order – whether American Gothic or fakir's bed – in the transcendent denial of what is universally considered low – typically the body. If cleanliness is next to godliness, this bed, made of the symbol of propriety, torturously expresses itself as the locus of the fears of society.

Some things will fail,  
if all goes well.

– John Marriott

The certitude that marks these works is illusionary; their demonstrations, in spite of their authority of presentation, are bound for failure. Even if

the works succeed in suggesting correlations between different discourses and thus attribute power to a seemingly affectless – i.e., powerless – discourse, all the same it is the built-in dissonance that puts these divergent disciplines to the test. As the artist says, these works "delve into the weaknesses of their own seam-lines, even as they use presentation-styles, materials, references, etc. whose narratives may suggest positions of mastery." Rather than delivering blows against the empire, the artist takes

aim at the spectator, whose role is to register the aura of the spectacle in a process of decay.

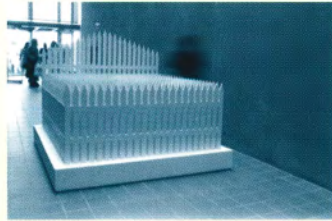
"This precipice between certitude, declaratives or argument, and ambiguity, open-endedness or inquiry, is a necessary place of creation.

**the empire, the artist takes aim at the spectator.**

If certainty and uncertainty are to be plumbed, in some contexts they must falter and coalesce." At times more pathology than inquiry, this borderline strategy for art lends it an idiosyncratic life in its homeless critique of the world it inhabits.



Detail Philip Monk's office – The Power Plant







You tell me your history,  
I'll tell you mine

1996

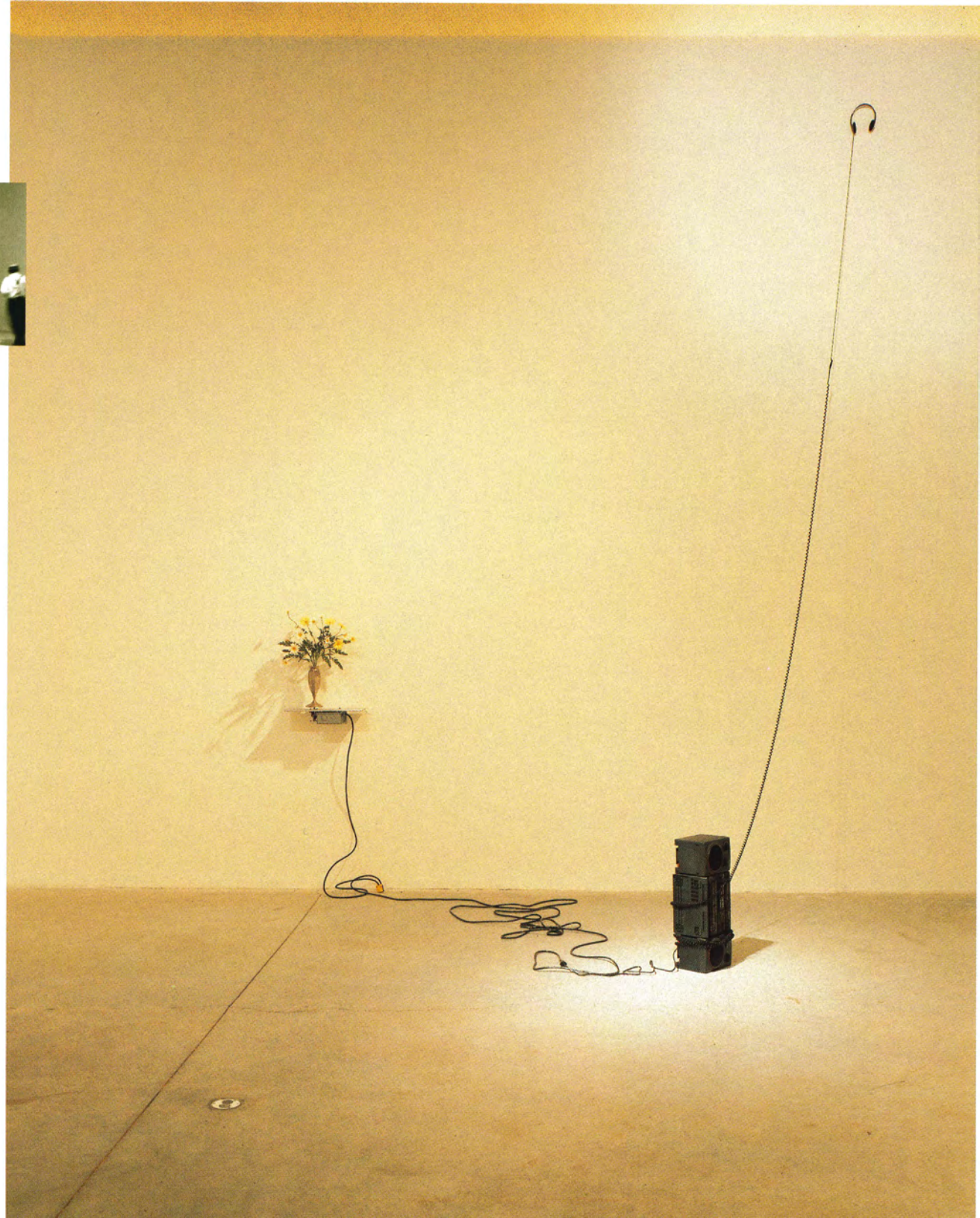
Refrigerator  
display case,  
deep-fried  
Grecian urn



Isolated Incidents:  
Time Piece (left)  
Snake Charmer (right)

1996

Silk flowers,  
motor-driven  
pewter vase,  
aluminum shelf,  
portable stereo,  
headphones,  
cords







**Morality Play**

1996

3 parts:  
Mirrored plexiglass,  
metal laminate,  
vinyl decal welfare cheques



Geometric Intervention:  
Fortune Magazine and  
Soldier of Fortune Magazine

2 parts:  
Computer-generated  
photographic prints of  
collaged magazine covers





Critical Tragedy

1996

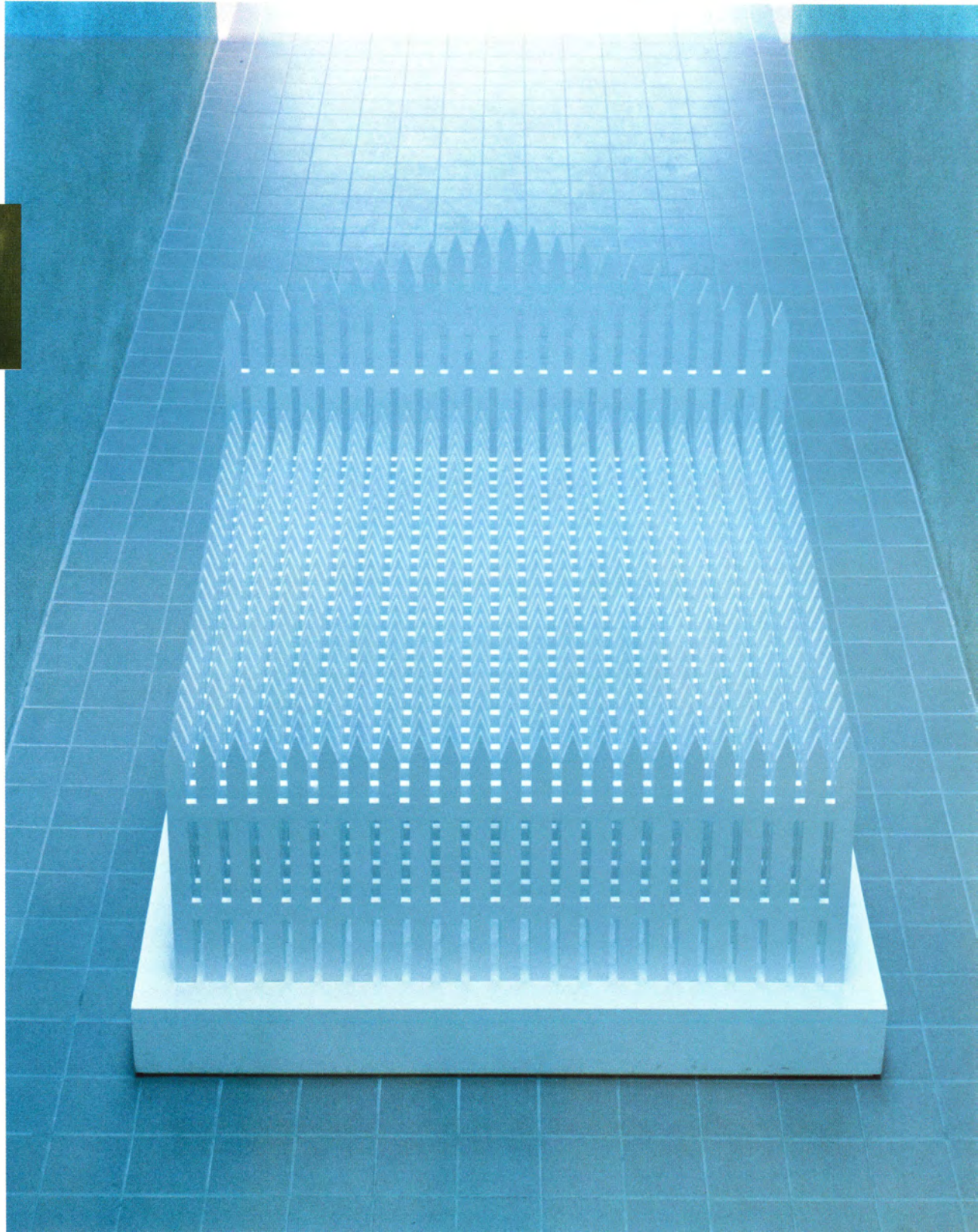
Rock-album-cover posters,  
easel, lecture easel,  
shoes, ashes, marker,  
platform



Bed of Pickets

1996

Painted pine



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Contemporary Art Gallery at Harbourfront Centre

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## The Exhibition

### **You tell me your history, I'll tell you mine**

1996

refrigerator display case, deep-fried Grecian urn

### **Critical Tragedy**

1996

rock-album-cover posters, easel, lecture easel, shoes, ashes, marker, platform

### **Isolated Incidents:**

#### **Time Piece and Snake Charmer**

1996

silk flowers, motor-driven pewter vase, aluminum shelf, portable stereo, headphones, cords

### **Morality Play**

1996

3 parts: mirrored plexiglass, metal laminate, vinyl decal welfare cheques

### **Geometric Intervention:**

#### **Fortune Magazine and Soldier of Fortune Magazine**

1996

2 parts: computer-generated photographic prints of collaged magazines covers

### **Bed of Pickets**

1996

Painted pine

## About the Artist

John Marriott received his B.F.A. from York University in 1992, and his Bachelor of Laws from Osgoode Hall Law School, Toronto, in 1995. He has edited and designed two volumes of the multi-disciplinary arts book *Sensoria from Censorium* (1991 and 1993), published by Mangajin Books Canada. He has exhibited in a number of group exhibitions in Toronto – including *Thirty Seconds Plus Title* (Art Gallery of Ontario, 1995) – and internationally in Glasgow (1995), Nuremberg (1992), Portugal (1991), and New York (1990). His work was included in the 1995 Power Plant exhibition *Beauty #2*.

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