

chological comfort would prevail over courage" (p. 264).

Nazi nurses did not see the violence and blood associated with the deaths of patients, who were sent away in buses, "fell asleep" following an injection administered by a nurse, or simply wasted away from hunger. The author concludes that these "ordinary" nurses, previously trained to care for patients, became mass murderers for complex reasons that cannot be reduced simply to their willingness to follow orders. Among these were fear of reprisals, isolation from one another and their patients, a sense of powerlessness and an enforced moral paralysis. Some had an

"unpleasant feeling" but did not act upon it. One nurse testified that she suffered unbearable conflicts of conscience but did not feel guilty about her assistance in the murder of adults because she was not directly involved (p. 255). A troubling comment indeed.

This research poses the unanswerable question: How would we behave in similar circumstances? The distance between Nazi nurses and nurses in Canada may not be as great as we would wish to imagine. The first nursing school in Canada opened with the motto, "I see and am Silent." At what point do obedience and professional detachment become dangerous? McFarland-Icke iden-

tifies 1933 as the year in which "strategies of eugenic management suddenly became the cornerstone of a new authoritarian regime" (p. 130). The result was the passage of the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Progeny. Alberta's Sexual Sterilization Act came into effect in 1928, and nurses played a significant role in its execution. Do nurses continue to remain silent today when they ought to speak out?

I thank Carolee Pollock for her comments on a draft of this review.

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## Lifeworks

# Remarking the unremarkable

"I have measured out my life with coffee spoons"

T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

Poor J. Alfred, caught in that awkward modernist moment when the manners of polite society had become hollow and the monotony of life paralysed the soul. But now that we are thoroughly postmodern, banality has apparently become something to celebrate.

Exhibit A: Canadian artist Kelly Mark, whose latest solo show was recently mounted at Vancouver's Contemporary Art Gallery. Since 1991 Mark has been attracting notice as a young conceptualist to watch. Her work engages with utilitarian objects and materials, which she subjects to compulsive orderliness and quirky forms of stress testing. *White Jars* (1994) is an arrangement of 144 Mason jars containing white substances; *Black Jars* (1995) repeats the exercise with black items. *1000 Hemlock Hits* (1994) consists of two wooden beams that have been struck together 1000 times; *Split Axes* (1995) is a row of wooden axe handles that have been split by an axehead and repaired. *Object Carried for One Year*

(1996–1997) is an aluminum bar carried in the artist's back pocket for the stated period. These pieces bluntly declare the effort of producing them, which may

invite the viewer to reassess the nature of our engagement, through work and repetitive action, with the material world. They also constitute a mimicry of modern, industrialized consumption: *1000 Watts and 1000 Hours* (1997) are displays of illuminated lightbulbs that offer, as one reviewer notes, "a conceptually eloquent, home-hardware meditation on entropy and hope, vigilance and ex-

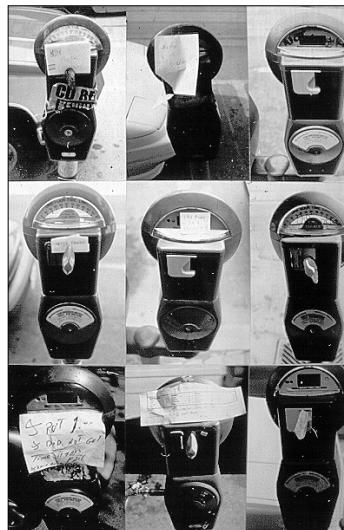
cess."<sup>1</sup> The consumption necessary for art is also enacted by a series of pencil drawings from 1997, which singlemindedly records the scribbling of graphite

on paper: when the pencil runs out, the drawing is finished.

In some of her more recent works, however, a sense of human agency re-

lieves the materialist weight of Mark's brand of minimalism. A grid of photographs entitled *Broken Meter* documents notes found on dysfunctional parking meters, giving us a gratifying sense of talking back to mute authority. *Placed* records adaptive responses to a mundane, repetitive environment with photographs of styrofoam cups, crumpled pieces of paper and other detritus that has been tucked into odd corners rather than being relegated to the pure randomness of litter.

*Origami Transfer* is an arrangement of bus transfers folded by fidgety travellers into interesting shapes. With these iterations Mark's study of materials inches



**Kelly Mark, 1999.** *Broken meter* (detail). Photographs, 4" × 6" each.

into a study of behaviours and a kind of sociologic voyeurism.

Reading commentaries on Mark's work, it struck me how readily interpretation rushes into the vacuum of the banal. What is self-evidently dull suddenly demands our attention by being singled out and manipulated by the artist, who thereby exerts a kind of intellectual and moral authority, directing us as to what phenomena in life we should remark.

Which brings us to Exhibit B, the *Journal of Mundane Behavior*, whose inaugural issue was recently published on the Web ([www.mundanebehavior.org](http://www.mundanebehavior.org)). In "A Mundane Manifesto," contributor Wayne Brekhus declares that "in failing to take the ordinary as seriously as the extraordinary, social science has produced a distorted picture of the social world." Drawing on structuralist linguistics, he invokes the categories of the "marked" and "unmarked." The "marked" is the exotic, extraordinary or extreme, which in being studied and written about takes on the status of the exemplary and instructive. The "unmarked" is our "epistemological blind spot" and consists of those things too

typical to attract our notice, but which by virtue of their pervasiveness are far more significant than the "marked." The journal's first issue offers studies on shaving, how people behave on elevators in Japan, and the spatial organization of libraries.

Brekhus argues that our notion of what is newsworthy or deserving of study must be turned on its head. He describes the old order as follows: "For a scholarly or journalistic article to be regarded as interesting it generally has to [be] ... *factually interesting* (i.e. statistically unusual or extraordinary); 2) ... *morally interesting* (i.e. politically important); or 3) ... *analytically interesting* (i.e. counterintuitive or theoretically interesting)." These criteria distinguish the figure that stands out from the ground of the

unmarked. Brekhus' project is to reverse figure and ground or, ultimately, to "mark" everything.

Considering Brekhus' critique of "interestingness," I wondered how medical publishing fits in. Are not the new, the politically relevant and the unexpected the sort of findings a medical journal ought to report? But then I began to ponder how much truck medical research has with the "unmarked" anyhow. In searching for therapies that will work for most people most of the time, are medical researchers not looking for the normative, the predictable,

the replicable, the generalizable, the reliable, the algorithmical? Perhaps they have been less guilty than sociologists of reifying the remarkable. Besides, Brekhus' manifesto is intended to improve ethnographic methodology. In medicine, ethnography is only just beginning to make inroads into the levelling of experience brought about by statistical studies fixated on narrow questions and standard deviations from the mean. For now, I reckon, we are safe from Brekhus' challenge. Medicine is already banal enough.

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**Kelly Mark, 1999.** Placed (detail). Photograph, 4" x 6".

## One thousand words



Sterilizing milk cans. No date.