

infra-thin

A CURATED PROJECT BY DAN DEVENING

infra-thin

Tuesday, Sept. 14 to Saturday, Oct. 30, 2004
Gahlberg Gallery

My gratitude goes to Barbara Wiesen, Director of the Gahlberg Gallery, for her invitation to present this exhibition. Her staff and other members of the College of DuPage community were invaluable during the installation; for that I extend my sincerest thanks. Eli Robb was essential to the success of this endeavor; his tireless assistance with preparing and presenting the work for this exhibition is greatly appreciated. Finally, I would like to thank the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in the Arts at Northwestern University and all the participating artists and writers for their sustained commitment to this project.

Dan Devening, Curator

The Gahlberg Gallery/McAninch Arts Center would like to thank Dan Devening for curating this exhibition, and to the artists and writers for making this publication and exhibition possible.

Barbara Wiesen
Director and Curator
Gahlberg Gallery

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infra-thin

Curator's Notes

John Arndt
Mark Booth
M.W. Burns
Janice Clark
Dan Devening
Zach Formwalt
Susan Giles
Carrie Lambert
Jim Lutes
Lou Mallozzi
Robert Meijer
David Raskin
Matthew Rich
Eli Robb
Nathaniel Robinson
Tiny Hairs

In the 20 works that comprise this exhibition, each artist and writer found an entry point through Marcel Duchamp's elusive concept of *infra-thin*; a notion he described as a fourth-dimensional, separative phenomenon. In its most simplistic form, *infra-thin* is a kind of immeasurable difference or separation between two things; according to Duchamp, this partition is invisible and intangible, but otherwise manifestly present. It was within his concept of *infra-thin* that many of his most significant works were framed. According to Duchamp, *infra-thin* is present in the transparency of the Large Glass; it can be found when pondering the difference between a common bottle rack and Duchamp's readymade art work Bottle Rack; and *infra-thin* is illustrated in the microscopic discrepancies in casts from identical molds. Duchamp used *infra-thin* to define the infinitesimal breadth of something without thickness. It gave him the means to characterize and identify subtle, unseen — but imagined — phenomenological occurrences. In his Notes, he illustrated *infra-thin* as the way one knows the presence of an absent person through the warmth of the chair seat from which they've just risen. With *infra-thin*, Duchamp found a perfect apparatus through which to measure that without definition, form or physical essence.

This exhibition grew out of a project funded by the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in the Arts at Northwestern University and originally took the form of an editioned, portable group exhibition of the same 15 artists, writers and designers. That project — packaged to include a book, CDs, DVDs, a poster and other ephemeral material — included text pieces, drawing and photographic images, installation documentation, sound works, film and two foldable sculptures. The structure of the CIRA project was initiated with Duchamp's Box in a Valise in mind. Started in 1936, Box in a Valise was Duchamp's "portable museum" and included facsimiles of his major works up to 1935. The box included 69 carefully reproduced objects organized in small suitcases much like a salesman's sample case. The exhibition at the Gahlberg Gallery at College of DuPage offers the participants in *infra-thin* an opportunity to place a public framework around what was originally designed to be a personally interactive experience for the viewer. For the artists of *infra-thin*, the gap, the margin and the interstice become important coordinates in the production of work for this exhibition. The various pieces address the liminal and intermittent nature of this immaterial model devised by Marcel Duchamp. In the end, what is conjured up here suggests that within the "half-spaces", fractures or crevasses of the substantive and the indeterminate lies the nominally definable.

Dan Devening

infra-thin in Obverse, Thankfully

Art can keep our hopes, dreams and self-deception alive, but only when it ignores Marcel Duchamp's deflationary lesson that reality is not what we would like it to be. It was in the service of this spiritless goal that Duchamp developed his arcane notion of the "infra-thin". In a series of meditations, he examined the slim limits of perceptual difference, such as the dis coherence between the feel of two liquids, or more relevantly, the distinction between a work of art that was created and one that was found.

While questions like these might appear endlessly provocative, they depend on an idealist fallacy, which mistakes the conception of an object for the object itself. Take Duchamp's notorious urinal, a readymade work of art entitled *Fountain* (1917). It first drains art of authenticity, originality and expressiveness, which are the very qualities people seek in art, hoping to find these properties reflected in themselves. Second, it eliminates actuality by suggesting that meaning is simply a function of various framing contexts. And finally, it makes an anti-aesthetic substitution, replacing feeling with thinking. All told, this is a vision of life "reduced to solely empirical considerations and without the deception (but also the protection) of faith in anything," which was the critic Clement Greenberg's greatest lament.

In addition to Duchamp's own works of art, this type of bleak critique played out in Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* of 1964, which transform Duchamp's meditations into an artistic hypothesis. As with a readymade, the *Brillo Boxes* shift art from a perceptual experience to a cognitive one. And it was because of transitions such as this one that the critic Arthur Danto argued that art dies when art takes a philosophical concern as its primary focus.

But Duchamp's notes, in contrast to this withering effect, supply a generative richness. For while Duchamp himself exhausted art's aesthetic faculty, the notes themselves open up to the play of imagination. Nothing serves better as proof of this unintended Duchamp-effect than the works of art in the current exhibition. Luckily, the 15 artists here reject Duchamp's most pessimistic lessons and instead use his idea of the infra-thin as an opportunity to make aesthetic works of art that take distinction itself as their theme. We get something like Duchamp on Prozac.

Take Jim Lutes' ink portraits of Duchamp in the loose style of Jackson Pollock's all-over paintings. Little else could so well capture the dichotomy that haunts art today, the divide between Duchamp's intellectual appeal — and the so-called institutional critique — and Pollock's invitation to the viewer's sensations, which putatively generates an aesthetic experience. Despite figuring both poles of the contemporary divide, Lutes still puts his foot down firmly in the retinal camp — art is, his work

says, regardless of whatever content it drags along, first and foremost engaged with our senses, at least initially. A strategy like Lutes' shows how the aesthetic can carry much more than is normally allotted to it, since it need not be confined to a private, subjective realm. It can instead — and also — engage the cultural, social and ethical, which are the public dimensions to any private experiences.

Another exciting aspect of curator and artist Dan Devening's show is that the aesthetic and even the artistic is in no way restricted to optical experiences alone or even to traditional media. Prototypical examples of this heterogeneity are Mark Booth's anagrammatic drawings, which put a cartoon-like twist on Duchamp's favorite form of humor, the lowly pun, while Carrie Lambert's textual discussion of the infra-thin raises the equally commonplace cup of coffee to something worth fighting over (but please, if coffee is that important to you, feel free to reverse my adjectives). Putting a different spin on the two engagements with words just mentioned are Lou Mallozzi's sound narratives. Here, in something of a material transfiguration, the presentation is no longer optical but is instead auditory — listeners find their intuition of geographic place disrupted in the clash between unmediated location recordings and superimposed commentaries. This concept of discontinuous response also dominates the reprocessing sound work of the jam band, Tiny Hairs, who in one work among others respond improvisationally, i.e., by feeling alone, to the ambient sounds recorded in front of a late modernist sculpture.

Extending clash and free-response in other directions is one way to describe M.W. Burns' sound piece. In contrast to Mallozzi's art, Burns' work shifts the point of view among speakers in more than one way and seemingly endlessly, translating what should be a coherent experience into a disunited one. Susan Giles pursued a similar cacophonous end in her video project, which presents a montage of images accidentally recorded while filming the standard tourist destinations. Instead of, say, showing us the Parthenon, Giles attends to the sidewalk the instant before the camera sweeps upward. The sidewalk epitomizes the infra-thin — it is the Parthenon, but different.

A sense of distortion also characterizes the video projects by Nathaniel Robinson and Zach Formwalt. Each in his own way addresses the character of original and reproduction, and authorial and representational voices, asking whether communication is even possible: Are we doomed to speak past each other due to various communicative transformations, never meaning what we say? It is this question of endless glances that dominates Robert Meijer's project, as he reproduces a number of Duchamp's actual writings on the

intra-thin, but does so in the signature typefaces of other artists. Same words? Whose meaning? This polyvalent aspect of the infra-thin receives a structural display in the organization of the edition project that inspired this exhibit, as its designer Janice Clark uncouples each artist's work from the pages themselves, letting two contributions bleed together visually and conceptually in an (implied) endless segue.

John Arndt's coat rack also shares the strategy of letting art peel off from its antecedents in various directions. His project riffs on both Duchamp's coat rack readymade entitled, *Trap* (1917), and on Donald Judd's progressions, which structure the distance between voids and solids by various mathematical formulas. That Judd actually owned a reproduction of a Duchamp readymade (a different coat rack!) only makes Arndt's construction all the more delicious.

And it is, finally, the delicious promise of the two junior-most artists in Devening's curatorial project, Eli Robb and Matthew Rich, which shows its true breath. Each seeks to examine the "real," and the difference between these two artists is, perhaps, infra-thin. While Robb seeks to infuse constructed objects with super-real standing by painstakingly replicating each in paint on its own surface, Rich's wall and floor works exist optically like a mirage, displaying a similar doubling and intensification. Both sets of works are as if, in Duchamp's words, "the material employed [by] the infra thin produces computable transparencies ..."

Instead of art's traditional servitude to gods or God, king or state, science and knowledge, the infra-thin in the hands of those who have kept the faith serves nothing but imagination. Thankfully.

David Raskin

David Raskin is Associate Professor of Art History, Theory and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He has published widely on contemporary art, and recently wrote an essay for the Tate Modern's Donald Judd retrospective, which traveled to Dusseldorf and Basel.

On the One Hand and On the Other

Between the mundane and the mystical lies the infra-thin. This notoriously indefinable term, invented in the early 20th century by Marcel Duchamp and taken by the artists who made this book as their organizing principle, is most commonly cribbed as the difference between two identical things. As such, the infra-thin is a kind of consumerist koan, as if the sound of one hand clapping were available at a Virgin Megastore. For while it is an injunction to attention, returning us to the irreducible uniqueness of each being, thing and phenomenon, the differential of identicals is also the perfect conundrum for capitalism, in which there are people whose entire job is to ensure that each batch of Chips Ahoy tastes the same as the one before, while daily life is full of ever more dizzying choices between functionally indistinguishable goods.

The sheer number of canonical art works from the post-1945 period that replay the logic of difference-in-same is a clue to its cultural relevance, think of Robert Rauschenberg, meticulously attempting to create by hand two identical paintings, in *Factum I* and *Factum II*; or of Andy Warhol, who approvingly noted that “the great thing about Coke is that every Coke is the same and every Coke is good,” but whose canvases relished the disintegration of the reproduced image as his silkscreens shifted and clogged. Robert Smithson was obsessed with the kind of symmetry geometricians call enantiomorphic — mirror-images, identicals that can be matched but not superimposed, like one’s right hand and one’s left. And art historian Hal Foster pointed out long ago the way 1960s Minimal art — like Robert Morris’s three rationally identical but phenomenologically distinct L-shapes, or Carl Andre’s eight different arrays of 120 bricks stacked two-high on a gallery floor plays on the dialectic of sameness and difference that is the fundamental logic of consumerism.

But if much art of the later 20th century trained the viewer to find *difference* in the same, more recent art has tended to find *magic* there. One piece I think of in this regard is Paul Pfeiffer’s *Poltergeist*: a tiny white stack of chairs that is the end result of a series of copies: clipping from the movie *Poltergeist* the image of identical kitchen chairs arranged by ghostly means, Pfeiffer used a computer program to create a point-by-point, three-dimensional rendering, and industrial prototype-production technology — which seems no less magical than the poltergeist itself — to translate the rendering into actual dimensionality, in essence creating a three-dimensional print of a two-dimensional image. The other is Tara Donovan’s cloudlike construction of Styrofoam cups, in which the very inexhaustibility of the supply and uniformity of the product allow its extraordinary transformation.

Even more than in the 1960s, we live now in a world in which everyone readily admits that there is no difference between most consumer goods, but where an extremely high level of experienced, lived difference between them is produced nevertheless, conjured up by the magic of branding. I am told by an M.B.A. of my acquaintance that Dunkin' Donuts' coffee consistently beats Starbucks' in taste tests, and yet just as consistently millions of people a day are willing to pay twice as much for the inferior brew. The point is not that we are a bunch of dupes (though there is that) but rather that we buy infra-thinly. We buy a difference that is quite real, even if it is immaterial; a difference in meaning produced by appending to the product a constellation of values and ideas — community, quality, tradition — encoded in a brand name. While in the 19th century Marx understood that the commodity worked by a fetishistic process, in which the masking of labor and social relations allowed them to be magically transfigured into value, it's arguable whether the process at work now is precisely the same. At the very least, the magic itself is now manufactured far more carefully and expensively than the product, and it is *that* labor that is thoroughly masked.

So, is today's art of the infra-thin, with its emphasis on magical transformation or paranormal production, the visual expression of the new commodity fetishism? No more or less — just as much and as little — as Pop or Minimalism were the artistic equivalents of a slightly earlier stage of the same reality. Minimalism's simultaneous repetition and rejection of consumer logic had to do with recognizing specificity in a field of similarity. The more recent art seems to imply that not brute difference, but something more transcendent, must be discovered. Both aesthetic responses embody the recognition that the skill in which consumerism trains you is the very one by which you counter its effects — the infra-thin always lies between meditation and the mall.

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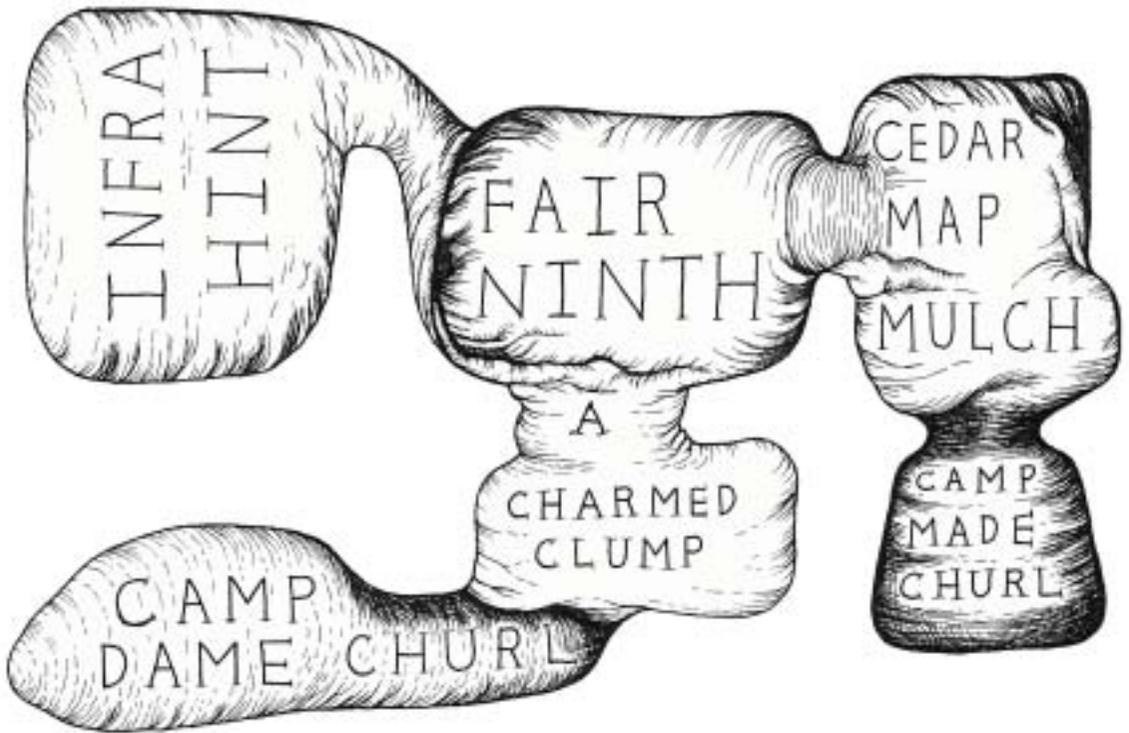
Carrie Lambert teaches art history at Northwestern University. She has published in journals such as October and Trans, and most recently in the catalog for LA MOCA's exhibition A Minimal Future? Art as Object 1958-1968. She is working on a book about the artist Yvonne Rainer and the spectatorial turn in U.S. art of the 1960s.



John Arndt, *Coat Rack*,
walnut, stainless steel, 2004

John Arndt is a craftsman and artist residing in Forest Park, IL.

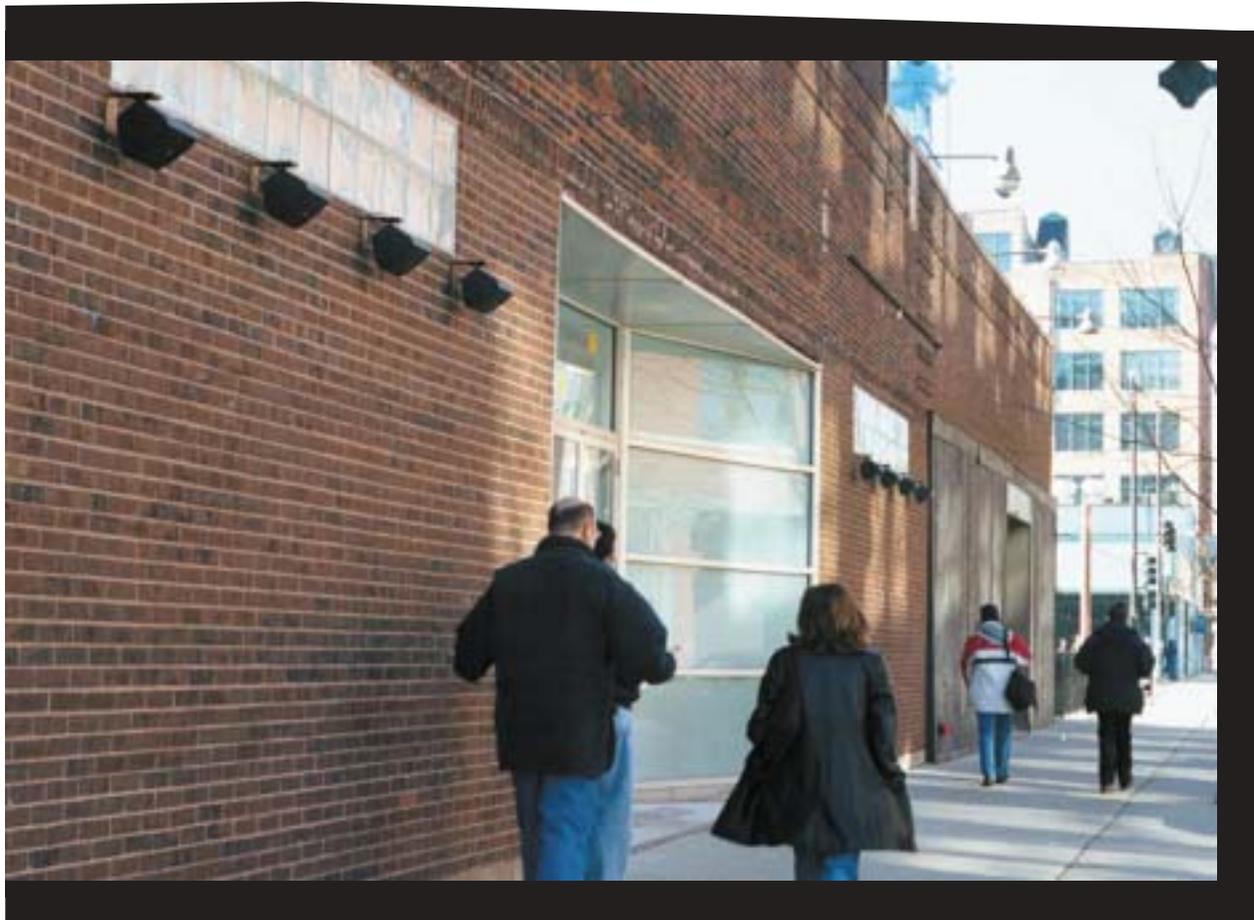
Mark Booth



Mark Booth, *Anagrammatic Drawing #3*, ink on paper, 2003

Mark Booth is an artist living in Chicago and Copenhagen. He is an instructor in the Departments of Liberal Arts, painting and drawing, sound and performance at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He received his M.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and his B.F.A. from the Rhode Island School of Design. His recent exhibitions include shows at the Bodybuilder and Sportsman Gallery, Chicago, and University of Wisconsin, Green Bay. His recent performances include shows at Kunsterhaus Mousonturm, Frankfurt; 1926 Gallery, Chicago; Hothouse, Chicago; and The Outer Ear Festival of Sound, Chicago. Awards include grants and fellowships from the Illinois Arts Council and the Experimental Sound Studio.

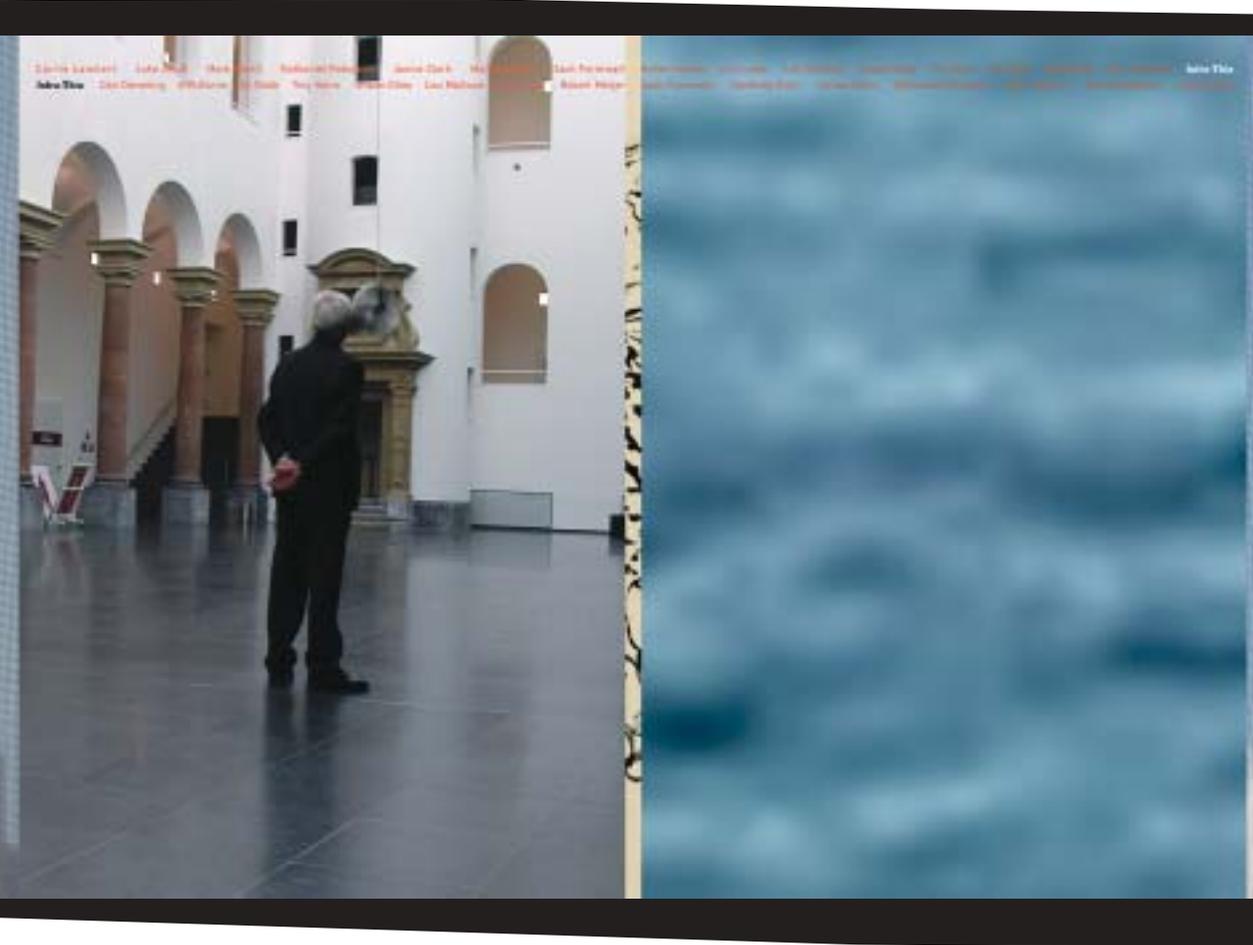
M.W. Burns



M.W. Burns, *Posing Phrases*,
sound installation, 2001

M.W. Burns is a Chicago-based audio artist using sound to conceptually activate space. Many of his recent installations rely on tactics of public address, projecting the voice into existing urban conditions. Other projects integrate prerecorded sound into an environment, instigating the perception of events taking place. Burns has had solo exhibitions at the TBA Exhibition Space, Chicago; Northern Illinois University Art Museum; Tough, Chicago and the Lab, San Francisco. His sound installations have been included in numerous group exhibitions, including the 2000 Whitney Biennial at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Sound/Video/Film, the Donald Young Gallery; Contextual: Art and Text in Chicago, at the Chicago Cultural Center; Time Arts at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; and The Body at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. Recent projects include Sound Canopy, a public sound system supporting audio work created to participate in the urban environment.

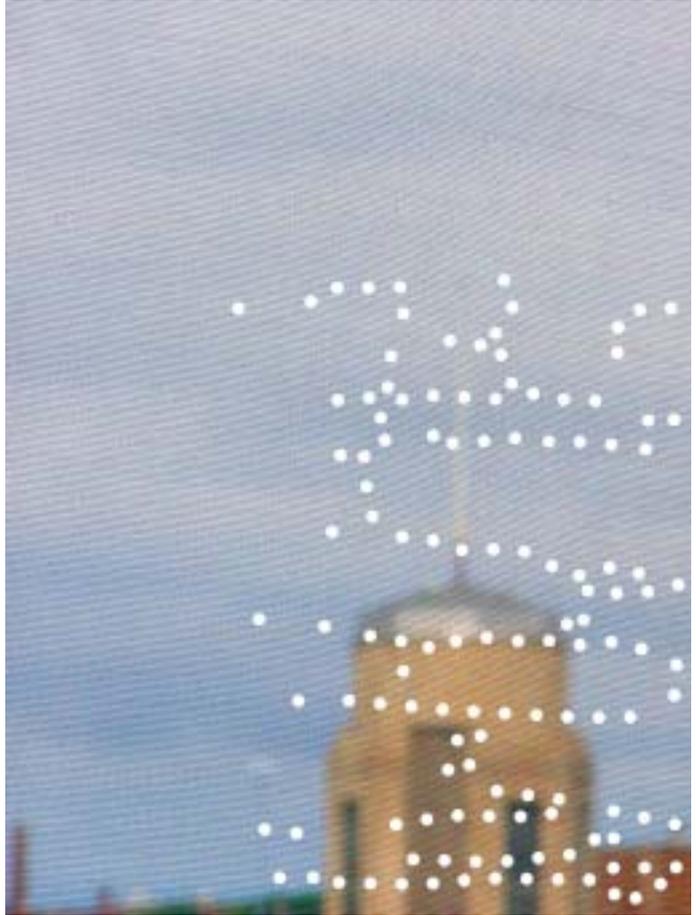
Janice Clark



Janice Clark, *Cover design for Infrathin/CIRA book project*, 2004

Janice Clark is a partner in Good Studio, a design and communications firm in Chicago. Her work has been published in journals such as *Communication Arts*, *Print and Critique*, and is represented in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She is currently a graduate student at N.Y.U. in creative writing/fiction.

Dan Devening



Dan Devening, *Screen, digital photograph with perforations, 2004*

Dan Devening is an artist and curator living in Chicago. He is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Art Theory and Practice at Northwestern University and adjunct full professor in the Department of Painting and Drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His work has been exhibited widely; in Germany he has presented projects at the Kunstverein Recklinghausen, the Heeresbaeckerei-kultur in Berlin and the Renate Schroeder Gallery in Cologne. His paintings and works on paper have also been shown at the Chicago Cultural Center, the Terra Museum of Art in Chicago, the State of Illinois Museum, the Renaissance Society and numerous galleries and project spaces in Chicago, Memphis, Bloomington and Indianapolis among others. He has received grants and fellowships from the NEA, the Illinois Arts Council, the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in the Arts and Art Matters Inc. His curatorial projects include *Seems*, at the Block Museum of Art, *Paper Products* at the Evanston Art Center and *Subject Matters* at Standard Gallery. He is represented in Chicago by Roy Boyd Gallery.

Zach Formwalt



Zach Formwalt, *A Topography of Leone Park Beach*, video still, 2003

Zach Formwalt's video work has been increasingly concerned with establishing a space where videos are not "read" as a series of events, real or imagined, unfolding in a specified period of time. He has called this property of narrative video and film "static duration" while "flexible duration" designates another form of temporality that is determined in the present of the viewer. He is currently working on a critical account of this tendency in film and video while also producing videos that work to explore this form of temporality. Formwalt received his M.F.A. from Northwestern University in 2003 and is currently (2004-05) participating in the Critical Studies Course at the Malmö Art Academy, Lund University and Rooseum in Malmö, Sweden.

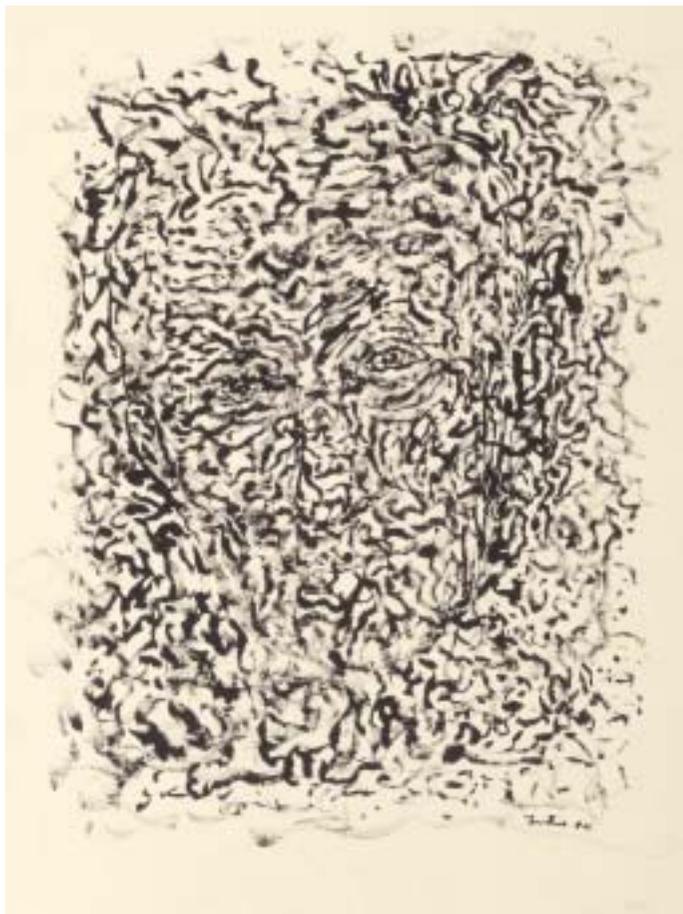
Susan Giles



Susan Giles, *Glitches, Hitches and Hiccups*, video still, 2003

Susan Giles is an artist living in Chicago. She teaches in the Department of Art and Art History at DePaul University. She has a M.A. from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a M.F.A. from Northwestern University. Represented by Vedanta Gallery, Giles' work has recently shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, Spencer Brownstone Gallery in New York, and Galerie de Multiples in Paris. Her work has also been exhibited at The Renaissance Society in Chicago, Santa Monica Museum of Art in California and Kunsthalle Goeppingen in Germany, among others. She has received several grants, including a 1998 Fulbright Grant to Indonesia to conduct research on the intersection of tourism and culture in Bali. She has spent a cumulative two years living and traveling in Asia.

Jim Lutes



Jim Lutes, *Untitled*, ink on paper, 2003

Jim Lutes is an artist living and working in Chicago. He is currently Chair of the Painting and Drawing Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His work has appeared in many solo and group shows, most notably the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Documenta IX, Kassel, Germany; Whitney Biennial, NY, NY; Corcoran Biennial, Washington, D.C.; Museum Van Hedendaagse Kunst, Gent, Belgium; and the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. His work is represented in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Illinois State Museum, Springfield; Domain de Kerguehenec, France; and the Museum Van Hedendaagse Kunst, Gent. Awards and grants include Tiffany Foundation, NEA, Illinois Arts Council. He also is drummer for the Tiny Hairs.

Lou Mallozzi



Lou Mallozzi, *Time well spent*
(285 stairs at Villa Serbelloni),
color photographs, 2002

Lou Mallozzi is an audio artist who dismembers and reconstitutes sound, language and gesture on sites, stages, radio and CD. He works individually and in collaboration with musicians, filmmakers and performers. Recent performances include Flykingen, Stockholm; TUBE Audio Art Series, Munich; the Empty Bottle, Chicago; and PAC, Chicago. His sound installations have been exhibited in Chicago at Gallery 2, Donald Young Gallery, Betty Rymer Gallery and Gallery 400; at the Fort Wayne Museum of Art; and at Persorsi 98 in Montegrosso d'Asti, Italy. His recorded and live radio works have been aired in North America, Europe and Australia. He is the recipient of three artist fellowships from the Illinois Arts Council, a residency at the Bellagio Study and Conference Center in Italy, and has been Artist-in-Residence at Harvestworks, New York and Spritzenhaus, Hamburg.

(for LW)

**WHEN THE TOBACCO SMOKE ALSO SMELLS OF
THE MOUTH WHICH EXHALES IT, THE TWO
ODORS ARE MARRIED BY INFRA-THIN**

Robert Meijer,
Misunderstandings, text,
2003

Robert Meijer runs the Bottrop-Boy and Semishigure record labels and also curates EN/OF, an edition series that pairs contemporary visual artists with experimental musicians. This series has been exhibited in Cologne, Berlin, Amsterdam, Brussels, Paris, Toronto and Chicago. He lives in Germany.

Matthew Rich



Matthew Rich, *Color Wheel*,
66" x 108", latex on cut
paper, 2003

Matthew Rich lives and works in Tyler, TX, where he holds the position of Gallery Director/Lecturer in Art at The University of Texas at Tyler. In 2004 he received his M.F.A. in painting and drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Since graduating from Brown University in 1998, he has shown his work in Boston, Chicago and New York, and has had work included in several multimedia book projects and exhibitions, including *doubleaught*, organized and published by Chronoplastics and *Emerging Illinois Artists*, at the McLean Arts Center, Bloomington, IL.

Eli Robb



Eli Robb, *Super-real still-life with desk*, (in progress), 2004. Spray enamel on folding chair and wastebasket, acrylic paint on wooden desk and picture frame, oil paint on felt-tipped markers and U.S. coins, lazertran on photograph and inkjet prints on paperback books, envelopes and legal pad.

All of the objects in this installation are encased in their own representations. The desk and surrounding objects are thus transformed from a familiar, practical environment to a site rich with opportunities for contemplation.

Eli Robb is a multimedia artist living and working in Chicago, where he recently received his M.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute with a graduate fellowship award. In 2003 he exhibited painting, video, sculpture and photography in Chicago at the Stray Show's Unit B Gallery, Betty Rymer Gallery, 1926 Gallery and Gallery G2; and at Goatsilk Gallery in Missoula, MT, and Sonneschein Gallery in Lake Forest, IL. A recent video of Eli's was reviewed in the Fall 2003 issue of *Artpapers*.

Nathaniel Robinson



Nathaniel Robinson, *Rapport*,
video installation, 2004

Nathaniel Robinson is a graduate student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He received his B.A. from Amherst College. He is currently a Jacob Javits Fellow, and shows with Gallery Agniel in Providence, RI.

Tiny Hairs



Jay Kullman, *Untitled*, black-and-white photograph, 2003

Tiny Hairs is an improvisational collective based in Chicago. The six members of Tiny Hairs have performed and recorded together since 2000. Tiny Hairs recordings include the CDs, *Subtle Invisible Bodies* (2001) and *Coldless* (2004) on the False Walls imprint, a split 12" artist edition on the German label En/Of, as well as additional releases on the Crank Satori and Bottrop-Boy labels.

Tiny Hairs members:

Mark Booth, Guitar

John Devylder, Double Bass

Charles King, Electronics, Keyboard, Processing,
Field Recordings

Jonathan Liss, Guitar

Jim Lutes, Drums

Peter Rosenbloom, Violin, Cello