



Lynda Gammon, Matt Harle, Elspeth Pratt

Silent As Glue

13 March to 30 May 2010

Oakville Galleries

at Centennial Square

Curated by Micah Lexier

Notes on Precarity

by Kathleen Ritter

*"If" is the conjunction of contingency. Uncertainty is free. I can't predict its tangent.*¹

"I started telling the story without knowing the end," croons Bill Callahan in the first song on the album *Sometimes I Wish We Were an Eagle*.² Immediately it summons the impression that he will extemporize any lyrics that follow; one line leading to the next, without predetermining the result. I feel my palms start to sweat. To perform without a script is a considerable risk. Like the recurring nightmare of the performance gone awry, one risks the slip, the awkward pause, the telling moment of failure in the face of an expectant audience. Yet, in a culture in which the ability to perform on command is increasingly valued, there is no longer any time to prepare the script; improvisation has become a necessary skill.³

I am likewise starting this text without knowing how it will end. I have been asked to write on the work of three artists—Lynda Gammon, Matt Harle and Elspeth Pratt—brought together in an exhibition titled after another evocative Callahan lyric, "Silent as glue." The artists' works, which are loosely framed under the term *sculpture*, repurpose a range of materials—paper, cardboard, vinyl, concrete, fabric, paint, tape, plastic, foam—in evocative and unexpected ways, and act as a foil to expectations of permanence, coherence and monumentality in traditional sculpture. In fact, the work is characterized by a refusal to take up these ambitions, instead opting for a relationship that is more intimate, nuanced and decentred. Unyielding to the increasing pressure to produce spectacles in a global economy that privileges all things grand, the modest presence of these works in the world is no less poignant. In short, the works' affects are quietly tenacious; they share a "muted strength," as curator Micah Lexier deftly notes.

As I listen to the Callahan album on repeat while I write, these notes serve not as an expository text on the work, but instead as a proposition—inspired by three unique art practices—on a possible relationship between the aesthetics of the work and the idea of precarity.⁴ I am uncertain what conclusions this exercise will lead to (perhaps none), but I believe that the provisional coupling of these ideas both suits the artwork and follows its methodology. I am choosing here to write *with* the work rather than write *about* the work.

Precarity

As a noun, *precarity* (or precariousness) is more indeterminate and unwieldy than most. That something is precarious implies that its future is hinged on chance circumstances and unknown conditions. It is neither certain nor stable; it bears no inherent right or claim to title; it teeters and threatens to fall over.

The word *precarious* is far stronger than *uncertain*. Derived originally from the Latin *precari*—which shares the same root as the verb "to pray"—the word first signified that which is granted to entreaty,⁵ and hence is wholly dependent on the will of another. It therefore came to express the highest degree of uncertainty, and is applied to things that depend entirely on future causalities. Further, precarity is characterized by a dangerous lack of security or stability, and this descriptor enters its definitions frequently. We can assume, then, that precarity is uniquely tied to risk: "An object is said to be precarious if it has no definitive status and an uncertain future or final destiny: it is held in abeyance, waiting, surrounded by irresolution. It occupies a transitory territory."⁶

Previous page: Elspeth Pratt, *Momentum* (installation view, detail), 2008, wood, paint, 33 x 84 x 63.5 cm, collection of Benjamin Diaz and Paul St. Amour.

Can certain art practices be characterized as precarious? What might a precarious art look like? How might it be experienced? How can we recognize a precarious aesthetic? It would have to be more than uncertain, contingent or provisional.⁷ Precarity is more charged, inconclusive and distinctly at risk. Likewise, precarity in art is political in that it signifies a kind of resistance through its very form, rather than exclusively through its content. It is not to be confused with something immaterial or ephemeral. Rather it signals a fundamental lack of stability, and this indeterminacy is part of the structure of the work.

To speculate further, I would suggest several characteristics of precarious art. First, the work is conceived without an end in mind; the artist does not predetermine the outcome. Precarity cannot be planned in advance; the work unfolds as part of a process, and aspects of this process are evident in the final work. Second, the interpretation of the work is wholly given over to its audience. Its meanings are not autonomously held in the work, but are made in collaboration with (and by the will of) a viewer. The work is vulnerable and uniquely open to various readings and misreadings. Third, it is “held by a doubtful tenure”;⁸ that is, the work is unstable, its future (both materially and structurally) is left to circumstance, and it represents a deep questioning about everything from its formal properties to its signification to its very place in the world.

Interestingly, the term precarity has surfaced in recent years in both academic and activist circles to describe the unique conditions of employment—specifically the prevalence of contingent, flexible or precarious labour—in a neo-liberal, post-Fordist economy.⁹ Thus, the term has become highly politicized. To consider precarity in relation to aesthetics is to acknowledge this aspect of its meaning, and to think through the relationships between precarity and art as a political project. As Paolo Virno notes, “Philosophy ... has to concern itself with the issue of what resistance forms may be developed starting from the *precari*. This is not a technical problem, on the contrary, it is an ethical matter and also an artistic matter.”¹⁰ Is it any coincidence that we consistently describe *art* as *work*, as if to underscore the point

that we have laboured to make it? Perhaps precarity is a locus where the relations between politics and art are redistributed.¹¹

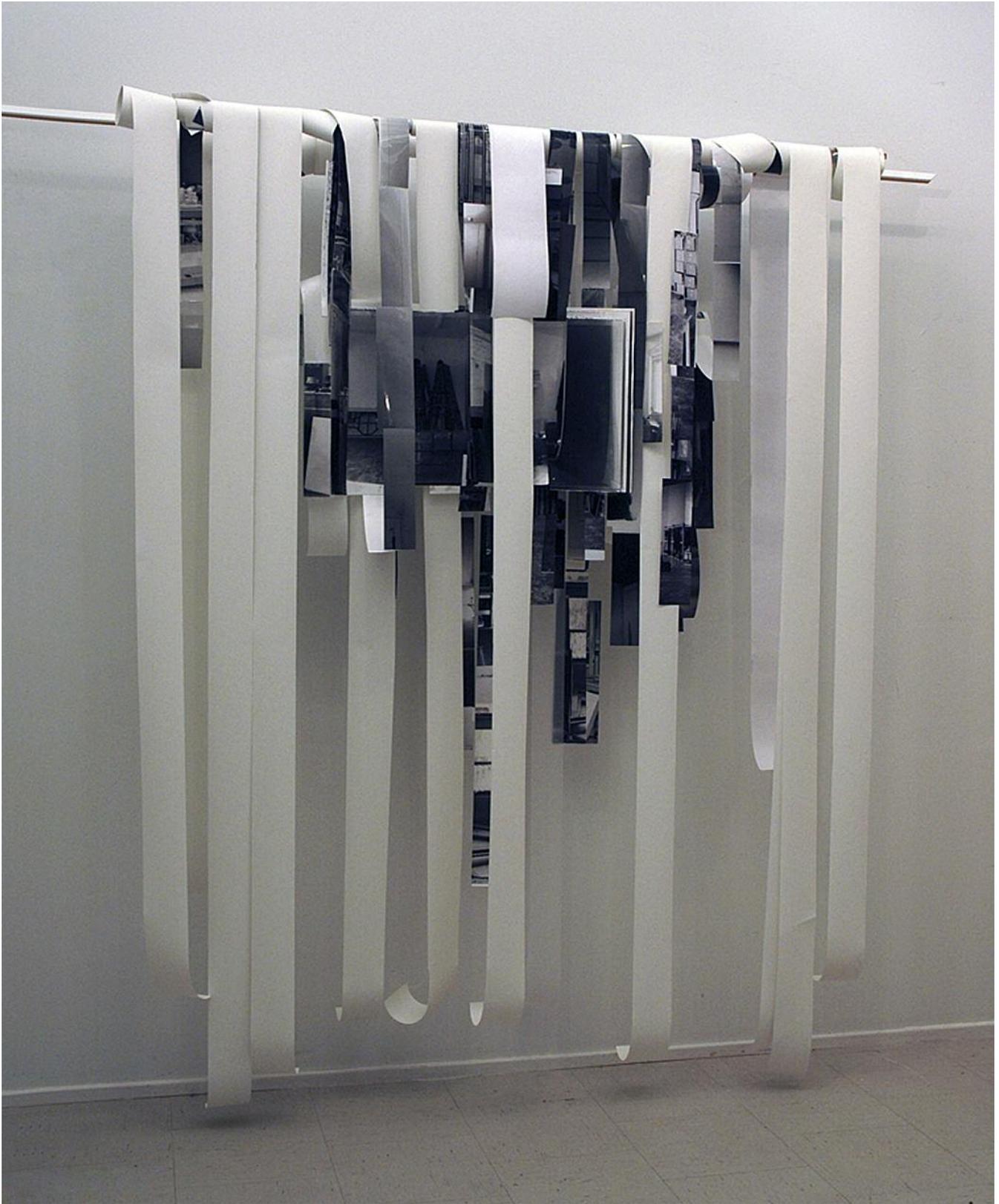
In keeping with these distinctions, I would suggest that the works of Lynda Gammon, Matt Harle and Elspeth Pratt are not immaterial or ephemeral but *precarious* in nature. The works cleverly evade hierarchies and largely do away with traditional sculptural methods and materials. The works' precarity ensures that it is out of step with conventional artistic traditions, as well as mainstream, market-driven culture. It intentionally lacks a proper place in the world.

Lynda Gammon

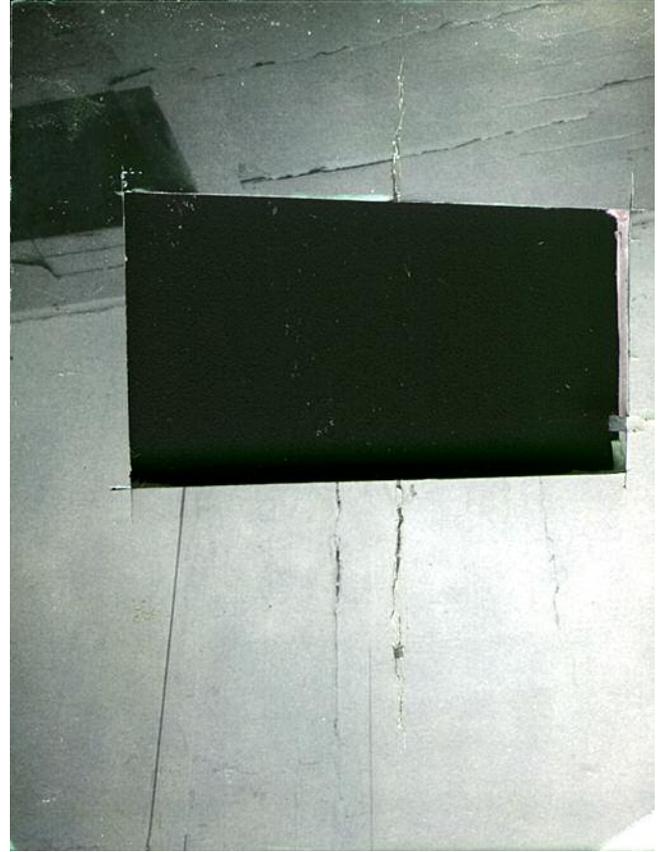
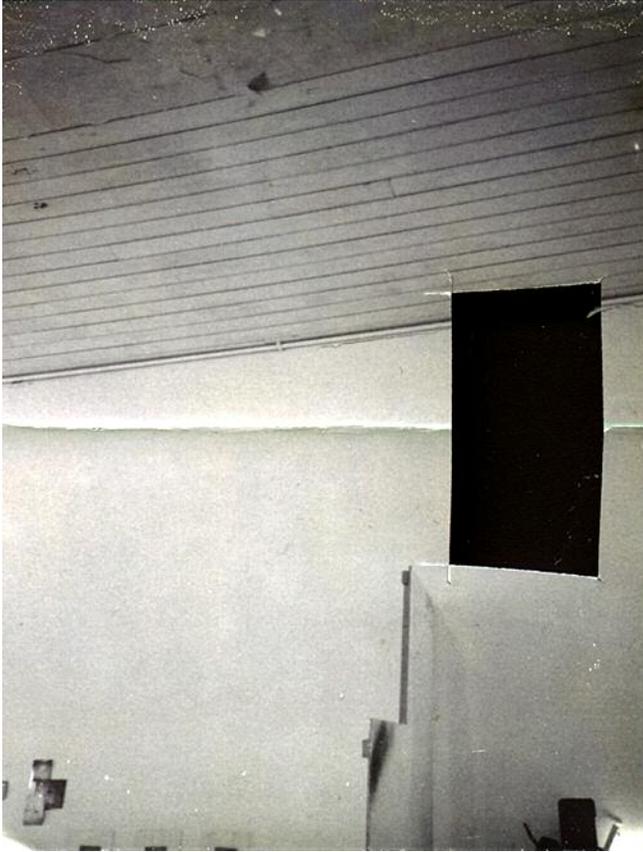
The work of Lynda Gammon throws a serious wrench in the distinctions between artistic disciplines, flirting with architecture, photography, performance, and sculpture, while being faithful to none. The work first appears as a chaos of ephemera—photographs, paper, tape, wood, foam core—like an exploded archive protruding from the wall. References to and images of derelict or otherwise imperfect architectural spaces—often Gammon's studios—abound, though never in their entirety, frustrating a desire for a complete image.

Ironically, the work uses sculptural techniques of assemblage by using photography at every turn, but to material rather than pictorial ends. Photographs are taken and developed, printed and cut, taped and glued, draped and woven together, such that no singular, coherent image can be deciphered. The space of the photograph is given over to the tactile, material qualities of the form itself, essentially turning the traditional function of the medium inside out. In the series *Cuts* (1985–1998), Gammon takes Polaroids of her studio space, cuts an imperfect rectangle into them, and backs the image with black paper, as if to inject a void in the otherwise primary picture plane. The images are then scanned and printed, all of their faults visible, even highlighted.

Gammon's studio functions as a kind of rehearsal/performance space. Her makeshift assemblages are “rehearsed” in the studio, then dismantled and built again for exhibition. The work is essentially performed



Lynda Gammon, *Interval* (installation view), 2007, rag, parchment, rice and tracing papers; fiber photographic prints, dimensions variable, collection of the artist.



each time it is made; it is never the same twice. In this way, it exists as a proposition, a hypothesis and a memory. It occupies the dubious ground between process and object, not resolving clearly on one side or another. Take, for example, *Interval* (2007): Long trails of paper are casually draped over horizontal rods and hang down in layers like locks of hair, nearly touching the floor. The layers are woven together with alternating, perpendicular strips of photographs in such a way that appears almost haphazard and refuses completion. Any picture used in the process is shown in fragments and viewers are likewise forced to read the work in its piecemeal construction, rather than in its entirety.

The lack of preciousness in Gammon's work is evident in both her use of materials and in its construction. Once dismantled, the documentation stands as the only record of its existence. Thus, Gammon's work remains

in a perpetually unfinished state. It exists briefly and precariously in the world for limited tenure and, in so doing, places an onus on viewers to remember the work. Its precarity arises both in its temporary status, as well as in its intended lack of visual coherence; it is not graspable from any single position, and gives itself over to a viewer to complete.

Matt Harle

On a cursory glance, the work of Matt Harle appears casual and unrestrained, as if the materials have been thrown in the same general direction and left to see what sticks together. On closer inspection, though, the work belies a careful and considered effort to combine unexpected forms and materials in ways that operate according to their own internal logic, a logic that awaits

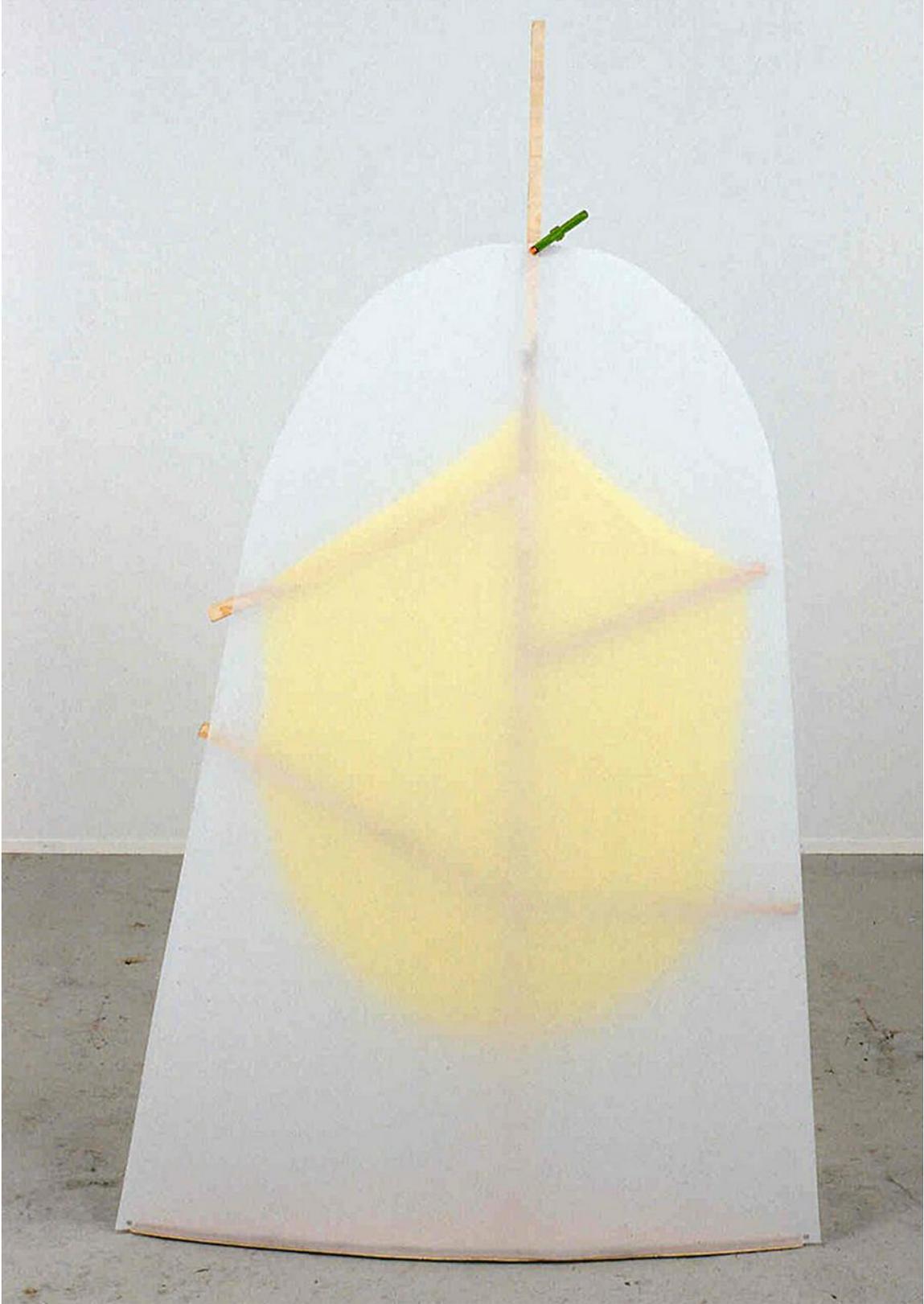
Lynda Gammon, selections from *Cuts*, 1985–1998, Polaroid photographs, altered; digital prints, 13.3 x 10.2 cm each, collection of the artist.



deciphering. Autonomous works emerge from a process-based trajectory in which a serial number of pieces are made using a given method, with each finished work standing as a singular proposition. The work hovers in a deliberately awkward juncture between abstraction and representation, physical and pictorial space, between support and structure, and at times seems to function symbolically as language. A yellow circle on Mylar is pinned to a skeletal wooden frame. A cast rubber *X* graces the wall, lines dripping down at various points. Such works seem to want to communicate through the use of symbols, though to ends that are not clear. A slab of concrete spills out over the floor as an anchor to a metal rod that holds a blue-fringed figure upright. The figure

reads anthropomorphically, if only by its faceless, erect stance. A block of foam insulation is cut and carved, a loose “scribble” flanks its surface, the positive space rendered in Hydrocal, the negative space in bright red paint. Here the figure does not just decorate the surface, it also serves as the structure of the work, binding the two sheets of insulation together. Nothing about the work is simple or clean: the marks of its laboured production are evident at every angle. The last work is a sweet, small structure that loosely resembles a folding chair. Parts of a wooden frame lean together, its unstable composition held in place with a two-tone yellow and pink skin of cast acrylic paint carefully sewed together in places, and attached to the frame with two map pins.

Matt Harle, *Untitled* (installation view), 2008, concrete, steel, spandex, fringe, 142.2 x 167.6 x 91.4 cm, collection of the artist.



Matt Harle, *Untitled* (installation view), 2006, wood, Mylar, acrylic medium, pigment, wire, grommets, clamp, 162.6 x 96.5 x 13.9 cm, collection of the artist.

The work quietly refuses a kind of visual, structural or material unity. It puts forward a range of propositions, without necessitating one in particular, and inviting viewers in return to move between differing thoughts on the work. In this way Harle's work assumes the characteristics of a precarious aesthetic. The work's unfinished quality, its denial of resolution, signals that the work is made without a predetermined end in mind. Rather, it is the product of a process that results in forms that could not be imagined from the outset. The work starts and ends with materials, and tests the limits of what they will allow within a given set of parameters.

Elspeth Pratt

There is a kind of vulnerability in the work of Elspeth Pratt. It offers itself up for critique, but does not easily lend itself to description or interpretation, at least not through language. It occupies a number of in-between, transitory spaces (both physical and discursive) and, like Gammon and Harle, her treatment of form oscillates between abstraction and representation, without favouring one over another.

Pratt uses common materials to reconsider—through unique and singular sculptural forms—how architecture scripts social space. Her choice of ubiquitous building supplies—laminated wood, cardboard, vinyl, carpet underlay, paint—questions notions of value, monumentality and permanence traditionally associated with sculpture and furthers an interest in the possibilities of materials to describe and articulate our built environment. Deftly referential, Pratt's work cites major architects like Shigeru Ban and Le Corbusier, as well as alternate, provisional structures, such as Brazilian *favelas* and the Rural Studio project Lucy's House.¹²

A number of works included here span the range of form and content in Pratt's work. The use of blue "spa" countertop laminate in a pair of lozenge-shaped constructions (*Escape to Paradise*, 2001) makes oblique reference to the seamless aims of consumerism and leisure. Other forms seem more recognizable in their architectural references, and evoke more temporary structures, such as scaffolding, balconies or pavilions (*Plaza*, 2009). The

work often has a strange and even parasitical relationship to the wall, and appears hinged to it in haphazard, awkward fashion (*X*, 2007). Still other works suggest darker references. A small edifice, for example, leaves only a narrow crack exposed to the wall like the window of a prisoner's cell (*Confinement*, 2009), while its glossy, bright red finish functions as a diversion to its sober allusion. Pratt's work depends on the familiarity of the lumberyard materials and the surprising and contingent methods used to combine them, ultimately undermining the material edifices that constitute our décor.

Pratt has developed a unique and thoughtful sculptural vocabulary whereby architectural standards are both evoked and made strange through what seems like a clever sleight of hand, leaving them open for question and critique through poignant, suggested forms. Meaning is rendered through materials that are combined in unexpected ways, forgoing their common use to suggest new possibilities. Pratt's work is precarious in both form and thought; the grounds on which it is made are purposefully dubious, and reveal a thorough questioning of the work's presence in relationship to the spaces it inhabits.

To consider the works of Gammon, Harle and Pratt as articulations of precarity in contemporary art is to acknowledge the persistence of a gesture that results in a defamiliarization of the surrounding environment, an *unknowing*, and a means to stimulate new thought and perceptions of the world. Precarity is a tactic to open up a space for questioning and to respond to a dominant culture that canonizes that which is stable, complete, fixed as a means to corral and contain difference. "That, to my mind, is the essential content ... of the political programme of contemporary art: *maintaining the world in a precarious state* or, in other words, permanently affirming the transitory, circumstantial nature of the institutions that partition the state and of the rules that govern individual or collective behaviour."¹³ This so-called precarious state is representative of the political and, I would argue, artistic drive to introduce uncertainty and doubt into known standards of value and form, in order to reveal spaces of possibility and imagination, and new opportunities for thought.



Elspeth Pratt, *X* (installation view), 2007, cardboard, vinyl, 30 x 26 x 17 cm, collection of the artist, courtesy of Diaz Contemporary, Toronto.



¹ Lisa Robertson, "Perspectors/Melancholia," in *SMART Papers: Hadley+Maxwell: Improperities* (Amsterdam: Smart Papers, 2009), 7. ² Bill Callahan, "Jim Cain," *Sometimes I Wish We Were an Eagle*, compact disc, Drag City © 2009. ³ See Jan Verwoert, "I Can, I Can't, Who Cares?" *Open: Cahier on Art and the Public Domain* 17 (2009): 40–45. In particular, on page 41, Verwoert writes "What would it mean to put up resistance against a social order in which performativity has become a growing demand, if not the norm?" ⁴ These thoughts on the relationship between art and precarity are indebted to a recent issue of the journal *Open: Cahier on Art and the Public Domain* 17 (2009), which elaborated the theme "A Precarious Existence." ⁵ A *precaria* was a contract granting a petitioner the use of ecclesiastical property for a specified time. While the land's title was not transferred outright, the (rather

precarious) occupant would enjoy all the profits and advantages to be gleaned from the property. *Precaria* refers not only to the contract, but also to lands held under the contract. ⁶ Nicolas Bourriaud, "Precarious Constructions: Answers to Jacques Rancière on Art and Politics," *Open: Cahier on Art and the Public Domain* 17 (2009): 32. ⁷ Contingency, provisionality, uncertainty: this is how the works in the exhibition *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century* (New Museum, New York City, 1 December 2007 to 30 March 2008) were framed, as evidenced by the following quote: "If the term 'monumental' connotes massiveness, timelessness, and public significance, the neologism 'un-monumental' is meant to describe a kind of sculpture that is not against these values (as in 'anti-monumental' but intentionally lacks them. Most obviously, the piecemeal, jury-rigged or put-together state of

Elspeth Pratt, *Momentum* (installation view), 2008, wood, paint, 33 x 84 x 63.5 cm, collection of Benjamin Diaz and Paul St. Amour.

these new sculptures lends a distinct sense of contingency." Laura Hoptman, "Unmonumental: Going to Pieces in the 21st Century," in *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century*, ed. Richard Flood et al. (London: Phaidon Press, 2007), 138. ⁸ *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary*, 1913 ed., s.v. "Precarious." ⁹ See Brett Neilson and Ned Rossiter, "Precarity as a Political Concept: New Forms of Connection, Subjectivation and Organization," *Open: Cahier on Art and the Public Domain* 17 (2009): 48–61. ¹⁰ Paolo Virno, "The Dismasure of Art," interview by Sonja Lavaert and Pascal Gielen, *Open: Cahier on Art and the Public Domain* 17 (2009): 85. ¹¹ For a description of art in relation to politics as the unique "distribution of the sensible," see Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2000). ¹² Lucy's House in Mason's Bend, Alabama was designed by Rural Studio, Auburn University, in 2001–2002, with exterior walls made entirely of stacked and compressed surplus carpet tiles. See Andrea Oppenheimer Dean and Timothy Hursley, *Proceed and Be Bold: Rural Studio After Samuel Mockbee* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005). ¹³ Bourriaud, "Precarious Constructions," 36.

Lynda Gammon studied at the University of British Columbia, holds a BA from Simon Fraser University and an MFA from York University. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally. She is an Associate Professor in the Visual Arts Department at the University of Victoria. In 2004 Gammon established

flask (<http://www.flaskpublishing.com>), which is dedicated to the production and publication of books by artists and writers.

Matt Harle lives and works in Beacon, New York, and has exhibited widely in the U.S. He has been the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, including grants from the Guggenheim and Pollock-Krasner foundations. More information about his work can be found at mattharle.blogspot.com.

Elsbeth Pratt is interested in architecture, the character of materiality, the value of the everyday, and the politics of location. She has been exhibiting since the early 1980s in Canada and abroad. Her work has most recently exhibited at Blanket Gallery (2009), Diaz Contemporary (2008), Charles H. Scott Gallery (2008) and the Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver (2007). Her work is represented by Diaz Contemporary in Toronto.

Kathleen Ritter is an artist and a writer based in Vancouver. Her work has been exhibited at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre (2010), VIVO (2009), Prefix (2009), Modern Fuel (2008), the Robert McLaughlin Gallery (2008), Western Front (2004), Skol (2000), and Access (2000). Her writing has been published in the anthology *Places and Non-Places of Contemporary Art* (2005) and the journals *esse*, *Fillip*, *Open Letter*, *Prefix Photo* and *SWITCH*. She has curated several projects, including *How Soon Is Now* (2009) at the Vancouver Art Gallery, and *Expect Delays* (2003), a series of artist's interventions that took place throughout the city of Vancouver.