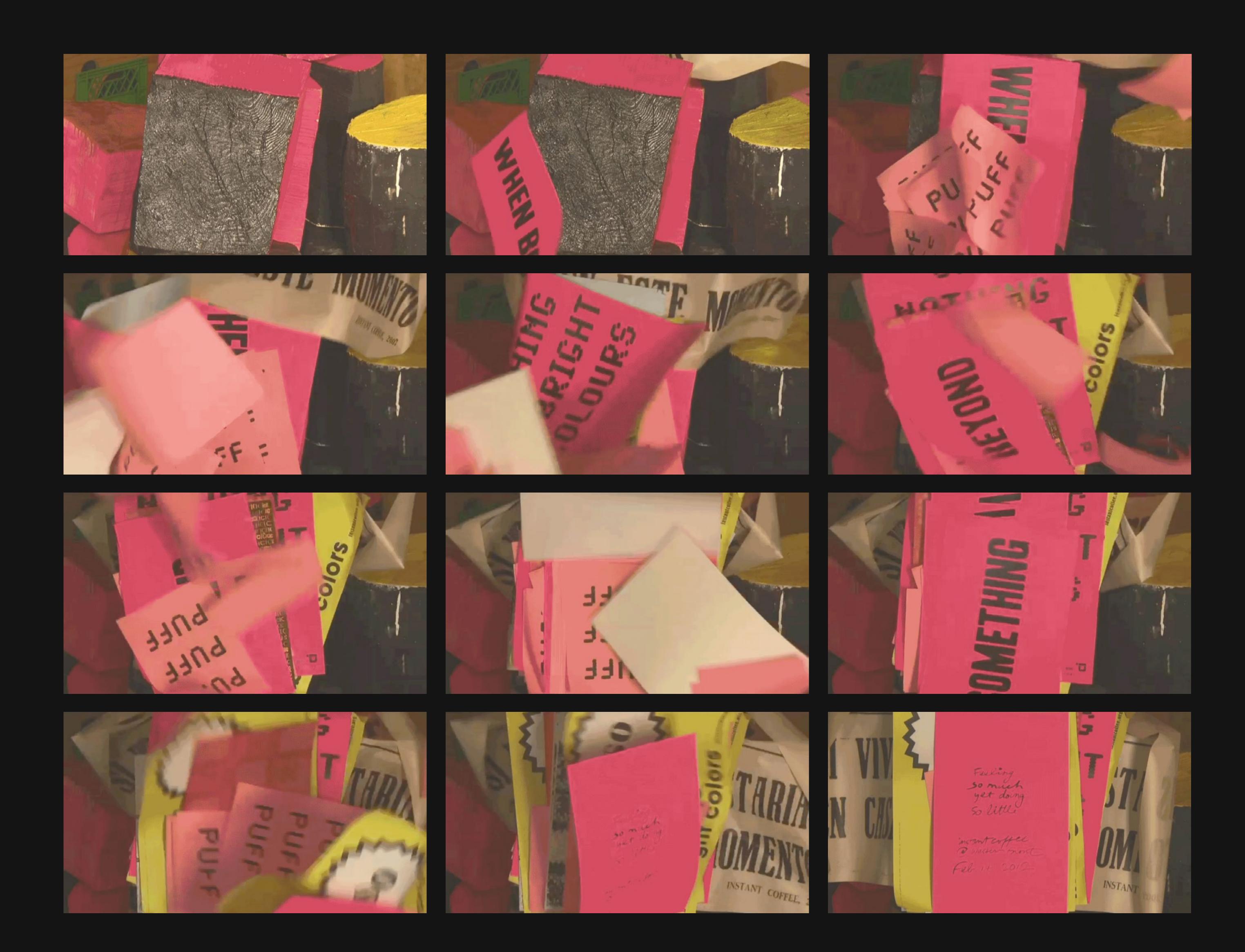
FSM YDSL

- e Instant Coffee
 - Caitlin Jones
 - Dave Dyment
 - Rakett





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Instant Coffee

It doesn't have to be good to be meaningful. We came up with this phrase in the early years of our formation and have since propagated it in many forms—as posters, t-shirts, by-lines, lived aphorism and internalized methodology. It is a slogan we wrote while discussing Andy Warhol. We weren't speaking about particular artworks by him but referring to his process and subjects. The gist of our conversation being:

- Quality matters but not more than production.
- Producing precedes evaluation. It comes first and should be pursued without the harbinger of good.
- It doesn't matter if we like Campbell's Soup.
- Taste rests in the mouth, but there is no need to begin there.
- Best to reside in the moment before judgment.
- Stay in the instance of making.
- Immediacy and production are related and should not get waylaid by concerns about reception.

Our exhibition "Feeling So Much Yet Doing So Little" was presented more than a decade after this conversation, and even though our belief in the original sentiment has not waivered, the exhibition's title acknowledges that sometimes our feelings do get in the way of our productivity. We believe that making and doing should precede concerns of quality; output is primary (even if

ECCONCIONAL CICIONAL CICIONAL

it means repetitiously painting beautifully warm yellow cedar stumps acidic fluorescent pink) but sometimes time is needed to reflect back on what we produce.

"Feeling So Much Yet Doing So Little," presented at the Western Front in 2012, is the impetus for this publication. We conceived of the exhibition with Caitlin Jones as a retrospective of sorts, not in the traditional sense of presenting a series of works spanning our collective life, but more in terms of looking both into the past and into the future while acting in the present. For the exhibition we divided the gallery space into three sections that represented past, present and future. A room filled with an undiscerning scatter of IC ephemera and objects from our beginning to recent present was 'the past,' and a blank red plexi-glass sandwich board reflecting a glowing red neon light in the shape of an empty starburst (which we refer to as a violator) sat in an otherwise dark and empty black room as 'the future'. 'The present'—a designed multi-use room with floor to ceiling bleachers and a low hanging fluorescent chandelier—served as lecture hall, performance venue and exhibition space. This publication is built with a similar frame.

Unearthing the past is a text by artist and curator Dave Dyment, originally written in conjunction with our exhibition "Nooks" at Mercer Union in Toronto in 2007. Dyment has known us from our beginning,

seeing IC develop out of a scene in Toronto of artists, curators and writers eager to show each other their stuff. Moving through present and future are texts by Jones, who situates us as presently reflecting the long history of collectivity that the Western Front is predicated. And Rakett (Åse Løvgren and Karolin Tampere), who make mist-like predications of the future with a reading of 'play' that diverts clear direction or interpretation.

A large part of the exhibition was incorporating individuals we'd worked with in the past, asking them to give presentations on their current work. Included was Bernd Milla whom we'd worked with as part of a residency in Worespede, Germany and Lise Nellemann who we have been in conversation with for over a decade as collaborator, colleague and curator, solidifying a long relationship with our exhibition "Year of Perfect Days" at Sparwasser HQ in Berlin, which is where we first encountered Rakett (Åse Løvgren and Karolin Tampere). We asked Rakett to write for this publication because we believe in their critical thought, but also because we wanted a collective voice beyond ours represented. We invited many other artists and curators to engage with our exhibition through performances and workshops and offered it up for people to use. We cannot thank those enough who were involved in animating the exhibition: Amy Fung, Kim Kennedy Austin, Jeneral Joke Store, Robert Kleyn, Samuel Roy Bois, Other Sights for

Artists' Projects, Jill Henderson, Hannah Hughes, Ron Tran and all those who came again and again. We hope this publication reflects our desire to participate in the present moment with a care and drive to understand what it means to want to direct our energy into making artwork and a space for it to happen before and beyond the need to understand its merits in this instant.

> FEELING 50 MUCH AND DOING 50 LITTLE

SAY NOTHING IN BRIGHT COLURS







INSTANT COFFEE, 2007

QUALITY IS BESIDE THE POINT



With wavering clarity we understand that what we do is confined to the limitations of representation and we're ok with that. This understanding is in the name Instant Coffee. As a product Instant Coffee is an effective substitute. It mimics the real thing without the pretense of being better.

The above comes from Instant Coffee's manifesto—drafted in 2005 to outline their artistic approach vis-à-vis their caffeinated namesake. Written in imitation of the many artist manifestos that have come before it, remains a guiding document for the collective. Non-aggrandizing and self aware, the "wavering clarity" of the manifesto runs throughout the prodigious career of Instant Coffee.

Founded in Toronto and now based in Vancouver/ Winnipeg, Instant Coffee grew out of a desire to move out of the studio and create work both in and with different publics. IC's most consistent members are Cecilia Berkovic, Jinhan Ko, Kelly Lycan, Jenifer Papararo, Kate Munro and Khan Lee. As a collective entity, over the past fifteen years they have configured and reconfigured themselves through relationships, projects and geographies.

In 2012, Instant Coffee took over the Western Front's gallery space for a "prospective retrospective". The exhibition's title, *Feeling So Much Yet Doing So Little*, is part of a long list of pithy, provocative, opaque, and often

self-deprecating slogans and directives. It is a statement full of both alacrity and mediocrity, it is simultaneously inspiring and defeatist. It aspires to lofty goals with negligible results, and, like all of Instant Coffee's slogans, it reads initially as frivolous, but reveals a deeper understanding over time and reflection.

During their six week exhibition, the Western Front served as a studio and space for both *feeling* and *doing*, on the part of the artists and their audiences. IC radically reshaped the gallery space through the construction of a massive but basic set of plywood bleachers—complete with a vinyl version of their manifesto spelled out along its steps. Disorienting but logical, the construction created three spaces that embodied the past, the present and the future of their collective practice. Simultaneously forum and folly, the bleachers functioned as a transformative large-scale sculpture, and also as an effective utilitarian space for social interaction—structurally embodying the set of relations that lie at the core of their work.





With wavering clarity we understand that what we do is confined to the limitations of representation and we're okay with that. This understanding is in the name Instant Coffee. As a product Instant Coffee is an effective substitute. It mimics the real thing without the pretence of being better. It isn't that much easier to make, but that much is reason enough to justify its particularities. Taste is a factor, and to those with taste is an important difference used to mark quality and define preference.

But QUALITY IS TOO PARTICULAR AND PREFERENCES CHANGE.

They are superfluous really, misnomers that distract from the fundamental reasons for ingesting either the real thing or its substitute. Value is in their effect. In its taste,

INSTANT GOFFEE BARELY RESEMBLES THE REAL THING, BUT ITS EFFECT IS EQUIVALENT.

Regardless of taste it still works Quality is beside the point. And in this disregard Instant Coffee becomes a medium to be used.

INSTANT COFFEE MANIFESTO

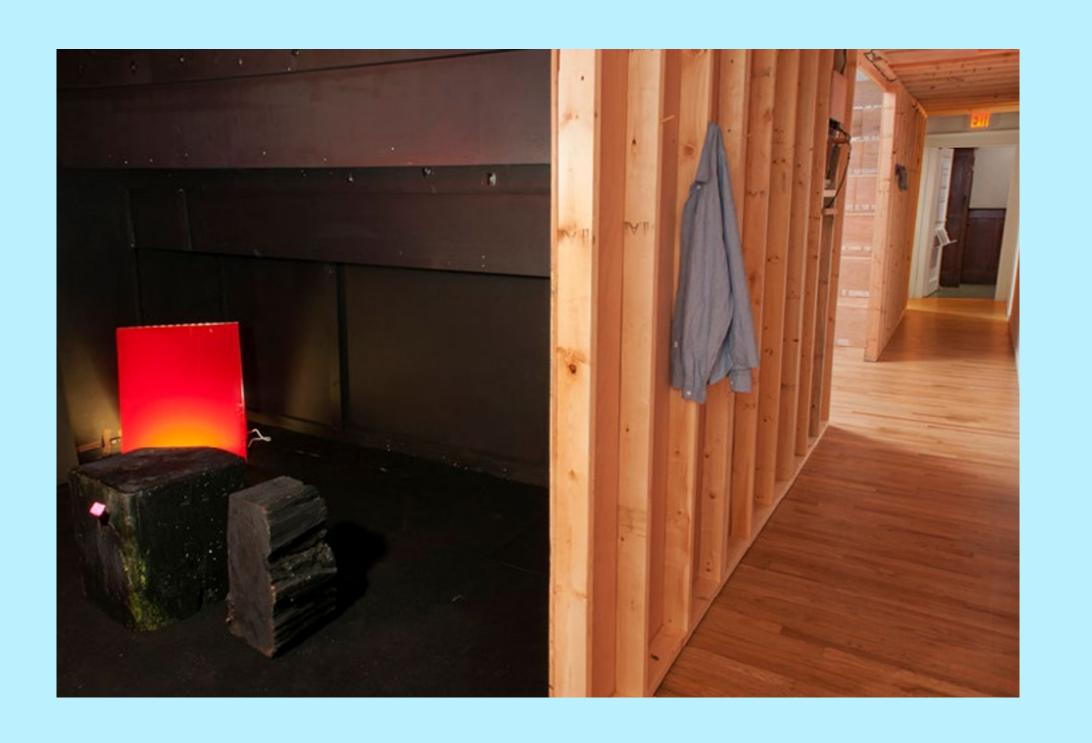
INSTANT COFFEE: Get Social or Get Lost

"Get social or get lost" is a slogan that points to a central tenant of IC's collective career. Their aggressive, yet inviting invocation of the "social" uneasily ties IC to the field of "social practice"—a genre of contemporary art that privileges social interactions and participation above material output. Since the 1990s, this "social," "relational" or "participatory" turn has taken many forms and tactics. From Rirkrit Tiravanija's famous Free (1992) in which the artist transformed Gallery 303 in New York into a restaurant and lounge serving free curry and rice to gallery-goers, to SUPERFLEX's Tenantspin (2001), a project that allowed the inhabitants of a Liverpool social housing complex to create their own internet television channel, these types of projects have emerged as a major movement in contemporary art. Coined by French curator Nicolas Bourriaud in his 1998 book Relational Aesthetics, these "social" projects—in the field of activism, institutional critique, or site-specific

public art—have a range of ideological aims, and depend on shifting and highly subjective interactions between artists and audiences.

In 2006 the art historian Claire Bishop wrote about the recent trend in artists' practices towards, "collectivity, collaboration, and direct engagement with specific social constituencies." In her much-debated essay titled, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents" (a text that later became the basis for her book Artificial Hells in 2012), Bishop states, "This mixed panorama of socially collaborative work arguably forms what avant-garde we have today: artists using social situations to produce dematerialized, anti-market, politically engaged projects that carry on the modernist call to blur art and life." She is quick to point out that these new, socially-engaged art practices are not easily critiqued on aesthetic grounds, but that it is rather the ethics and intent of a project that becomes the focal point for criticism. For Bishop, belief in the ameliorative qualities of social practice is regarded as somewhat naive, highly co-optable by neoliberal ideology, and lacking aesthetic criteria. She writes, "There can be no failure, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond".2





Whether or not one agrees with Bishop, it is within her criticisms of social practice that the particular genius behind Instant Coffee's invocation of "social" can be seen. Again, from their *Manifesto*:

Instant Coffee barely resembles the real thing, but its effect is equivalent.

Regardless of taste it still works. Quality is beside the point.

By consciously embedding a rejection of criteria and "quality" within their own manifesto, IC completely destabilizes any notion of aesthetic criteria. Their name, their manifesto, and their larger practice already contains within it not only a criticism of the very notion of quality, but also of their own relationship to the market, their efficacy to their audience, and their role as artists in a capitalist society more broadly.

INSTANT COFFEE: It doesn't have to be good to be meaningful

Over the course of the six-week exhibition, Instant Coffee relentlessly programmed the gallery space. Tuesdays were devoted to reading Charles Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*, Wednesdays were for socializing and wood-whittling, and every Saturday Instant Coffee presented *STOREFRONT*: a rotating shop in which the group sold furniture from their West Coast Modern furniture collection (including brightly-painted wooden stumps) and provided a forum for local artists/furniture designers including Robert Kleyn and Samuel Roy-Bois. Additionally, other artists were invited every Saturday to produce their own programs and events: the artist Ron Tran led a life drawing class, critic Amy Fung presented an endurance performance during which she assembled



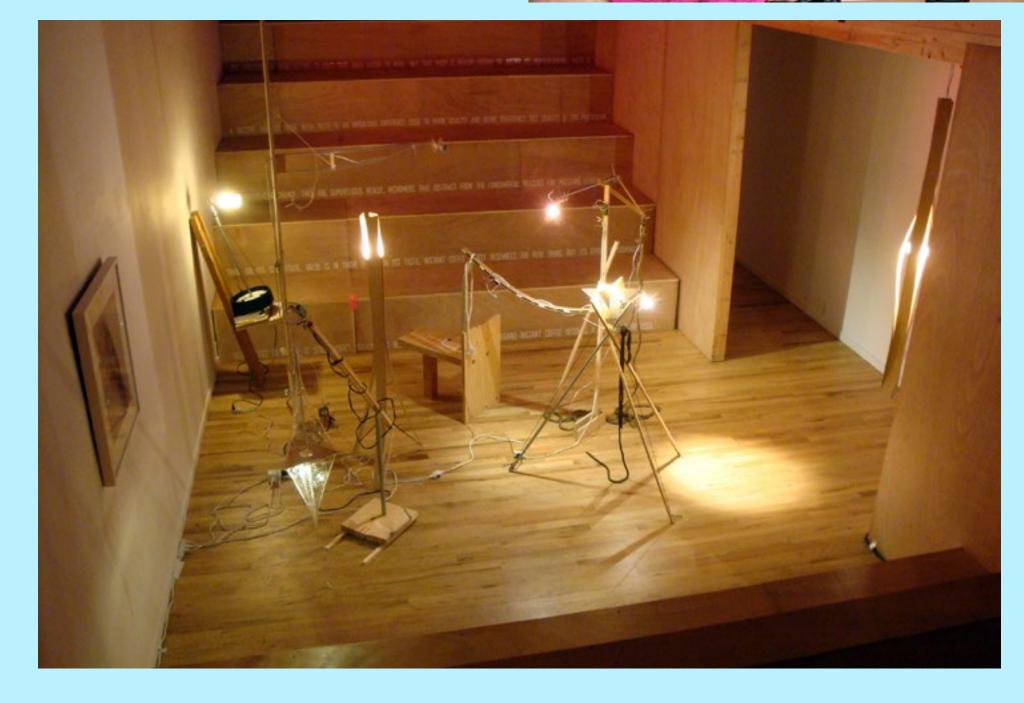














a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle of a Jackson Pollock painting, and artists Aaron Carpenter and Jonathan Middleton sold client-specific jokes of the "knock knock" and "lightbulb" variety in their "Jeneral Joke Store." For the *Prospective Lecture Series*, Instant Coffee invited international curators Bernd Milla, Lise Nellmann and Rakett (Åse Løvgren and Karolin Tampere), to share their experiences working with Instant Coffee in the past, and forecast their own prospective futures. Rakett looked closely at the role art was playing in sites of urban development, and examined how public art—temporary or otherwise—was both instrumentalized by cities and real estate developers, and activated as a site of resistance.

Additionally, Other Sights for Artists' Projects (another Vancouver-based collective) hosted the forum *The Future is Floating*, inviting artists, architects and local community members to think together about their current realities and collective future in regards to issues of art and development in the city of Vancouver.

Seen as a whole, these motley events exemplified the generative nature of IC's social sculptures. By relinquishing control and creating space, the ad hoc combination of people and perspectives gave rise to deeply meaningful and influential outcomes.

INSTANT COFFEE: There are no possessives in Instant Coffee

Instant Coffee self-identifies as a "service-oriented" artist collective. This articulation of their practice draws inspiration from the 1994 text by Andrea Fraser and Helmut Draxler, "Services: A proposal for an exhibition and a topic of discussion." In it, Fraser and Draxler attempt to provide a new working framework for project-based, social and community-based art practices. Outlining their assumptions around "service" or "project-based" practices, they write, "[t]he practices currently characterized as 'project work' do not necessarily share a thematic, ideological or procedural basis. What they do share is the fact that they all involve expending an amount of labor which is either in excess of, or independent of, any specific material production and which cannot be

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transacted as or along with a product."³ Twelve years before Bishop's article, their concern was less about developing criteria for the reception and critique of these new forms, and more to do with arriving at a shared criteria for the production and labour necessary to carry out such projects. They set out to establish guidelines for both artists and institutions to work collectively, and to continuously reevaluate their relationships with one another.

QUALITY IS BESIDE THE POINT

No other single project of IC encapsulates IC's "service" to their community better than the listserv. Since 2000, IC has been emailing in multiple cities a weekly list of art-related events. From their own writing:

[it] started with the rudimentary desire to inform our peers and other interested parties of our activities. We compiled our email address books and quickly amassed a substantial list of artists, curators, designers, journalists and so on—basically a list of people whose attention we wanted... As follows, people began asking to receive our postings and institutions started asking us to promote their activities. There were offers to pay us for this service. We did collect money for a month or so, but quickly learnt that money sullied it for us. For one, invoicing sucks and more importantly, it affected the type of event we promoted. Suddenly we were sending out

PR for stuff we didn't want to attend. It took the pleasure and sincerity away from the process, and it made it a job when we really saw it as art-making.

The 15 year aggregate of the IC listserv, with its poetic subject headings, sometimes erratic timing and quirky typeset glitches, has become in and of itself an essential piece of Canadian art history. Artist-run centres, commercial galleries and major institutions all utilize their service to promote cultural events. And at a time when one e-flux email costs \$800 and Facebook increasingly forces us to pay to "boost" our posts, IC's free email service has become essential to the communities that it serves.

Like Fraser and Draxler, IC works both inside and outside of traditional institutions to create alternate structures for art production, whether they be physical, virtual or psychological. Because in most cases there is a lack of material output, it is precisely this labour which is their work of art. The act of negotiating this service, this labour, this artwork, within the institution played out practically and poignantly in many instances over the course of *Feeling So Much Yet Doing So Little*.

The Western Front, a formerly collectively-run institution, has, over its 43 year history, become increasingly (and often disparagingly) institutionalized. Where artists used to live and work, now employees





arrive and go home—the model of labour and production on which the institution was founded has completely shifted. This shift is also represented physically within the space. What is now a white cube gallery was at one point the social centre of the Western Front: a bar and dining room. So, while the Western Front, itself concerned with institutional burdens such as occupancy loads and exit signs, IC, as a meta-institution, was able to collectively and temporarily transport the room back to its original artist-led function. In so doing, they both challenged and honoured the larger institutional framework within which they were operating. IC's labour served to reopen past institutional possibilities by reflecting on their own. These services resist de facto institutionalization in that they are not offered to us: rather, they are performed.

INSTANT COFFEE: is happily destined for a life of imitation

"All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that's more social, more collaborative, and more real than art."

It is with this quote from Dan Graham that Claire Bishop begins "The Social Turn." In this context it reads as criticism; in the context of Instant Coffee, Graham's quote provides a useful frame for a range of historical precedents.

In the early 1970s, Joseph Beuys articulated the notion of a "social sculpture": a utopian concept in which the broader social organism was itself a work of art. Another Fluxus artist, Robert Filliou, similarly connected together the whole of human activity and



social relations as part of an "Eternal Network" of artistic production and reception. Filliou's network, including his belief in the social function of art and the potential for art to transform society, is deeply embedded in the Western Front psyche. The Front itself was established as an interdisciplinary artwork, a "social sculpture" in which living, eating, drinking, sleeping, fucking, learning and teaching were indistinguishable from performance art, music and video.

IC can certainly be viewed through the lens of this nascent artist-run culture, but the collective is perhaps even more indebted to the history of artist collectives such as N. E. Thing Co. (Ingrid and Ian Baxter) and General Idea. Their use and exploitation of the "brand"—a corporate ideology and mode of production has provided a subversive, savvy and unique perspective from which to question the changing role of artists and the value of art. N. E. Thing Co.'s brand aesthetic was deeply administrative. Their official seals and authentic documents evoked a corporate entity from which they undertook their institutional critique of both art and the government and corporate structures that supported it. General Idea's brand was more in tune with pop culture—beauty pageants, consumer goods, boutiques and mass media infiltration—creating a mythology around their artistic practice and lifestyle, which eventually became indistinguishable from one another.

Instant Coffee's brand is contained within its name. Strong, but decidedly low-quality; cheaper than the fancy stuff, but just as effective. Their repeating forms come from an advertising and sales vernacular: sandwich boards, bumper stickers and posters with promotional graphics are used to send a message to the masses, and send it on the cheap. Treating these familiar tropes as pure form, they not only carry within them a critique of aesthetic criteria, but also reflect the reality of making artwork in a non-market context.

Beyond aesthetics, another key element of IC's particular brand is their dedication to the party. Parties, and their community's experience of them, are an institutional priority. For the *Light Bar*, one of IC's most enduring platforms, Instant Coffee inhabited the role of the "party promoter." Erected in an empty space in Gastown during the 2010 Winter Olympics (and at multiple sites since), the *Light Bar* was, like *Feeling So Much Yet Doing So Little*, a platform for multiple events. Constructed out of plywood and featuring full-spectrum lighting and Vitamin D-infused cocktails, the *Light Bar* and its program of lectures, music and dance parties was antidote to dark and rainy Northern winters. Production and pleasure combined to become an essential focal point for Vancouver's cultural community during this period.







INSTANT COFFEE: Say Nothing in Bright Colours

QUALITY IS BESIDE THE POINT

Instant Coffee never fails to offer us the full gamut of both "goods and services." Lured in by a colourful glow, the first thing visitors saw upon entering the Western Front gallery was a small room nestled underneath the bleachers. This inviting gallery contained the accumulated material manifestation of the IC brand: furniture made from plastic buckets and duct tape, speakers encased in coolers, posters, bumper stickers, plexiglass sandwich boards and disco balls. A couch made from Instant Coffee's favourite thrift store treasure—the hand knit, granny-made afghan blanket occupied a prime corner of the space and provided a comfortable resting spot for visitors on more than one occasion. An obsolete video monitor played the trailer that was created for the retrospective on repeat—an animated version of the ephemera adorning the walls.

Predominantly neon pink and orange, Instant Coffee's material retrospective of things past was unmistakably cheap and bombastic, but also beautiful, welcoming and comfortable.

In contrast to the bright colours of the front gallery, beneath the opposite bank of seats was a room completely dark but for a neon sign and a blank, backlit sandwich board. Where the first gallery represented the past, and the central arena held the present, this small gallery tackled the "prospective" part of Feeling So Much Yet Doing So Little. The neon sign took the shape of a "violator"—a graphic design form specifically intended to disrupt (or violate) by being overlaid on another design, often a sticker-updating the current "new" or "sale" status of a consumer object. In this instance, installed in a dark room, the sign disrupted any easy reading of Instant Coffee's future. Likewise, a blank sandwich board proclaimed nothing. The future for IC, while surely not bleak, remains relatively unknown. By creating a reflective space for their own future, Instant Coffee provided for themselves what their services have continually provided for us—a space without prescribed outcomes.

INSTANT COFFEE: Too old to die young

The generosity of Instant Coffee cannot be overstated. Their ongoing devotion to the social experience of multiple communities is unrivaled, and their impact on Vancouver is undeniable. At a time when art institutions are facing increasing pressure from funders, government and otherwise, to focus more on "engagement," "collaboration," and "outreach," IC's brand of social practice resists this type of neo-liberal co-option portended by Claire Bishop. Rather, in the spirit of inauthenticity suggested by their namesake instant coffee, a truly authentic form of engagement—messy and cheap, but equally meaningful—emerges.

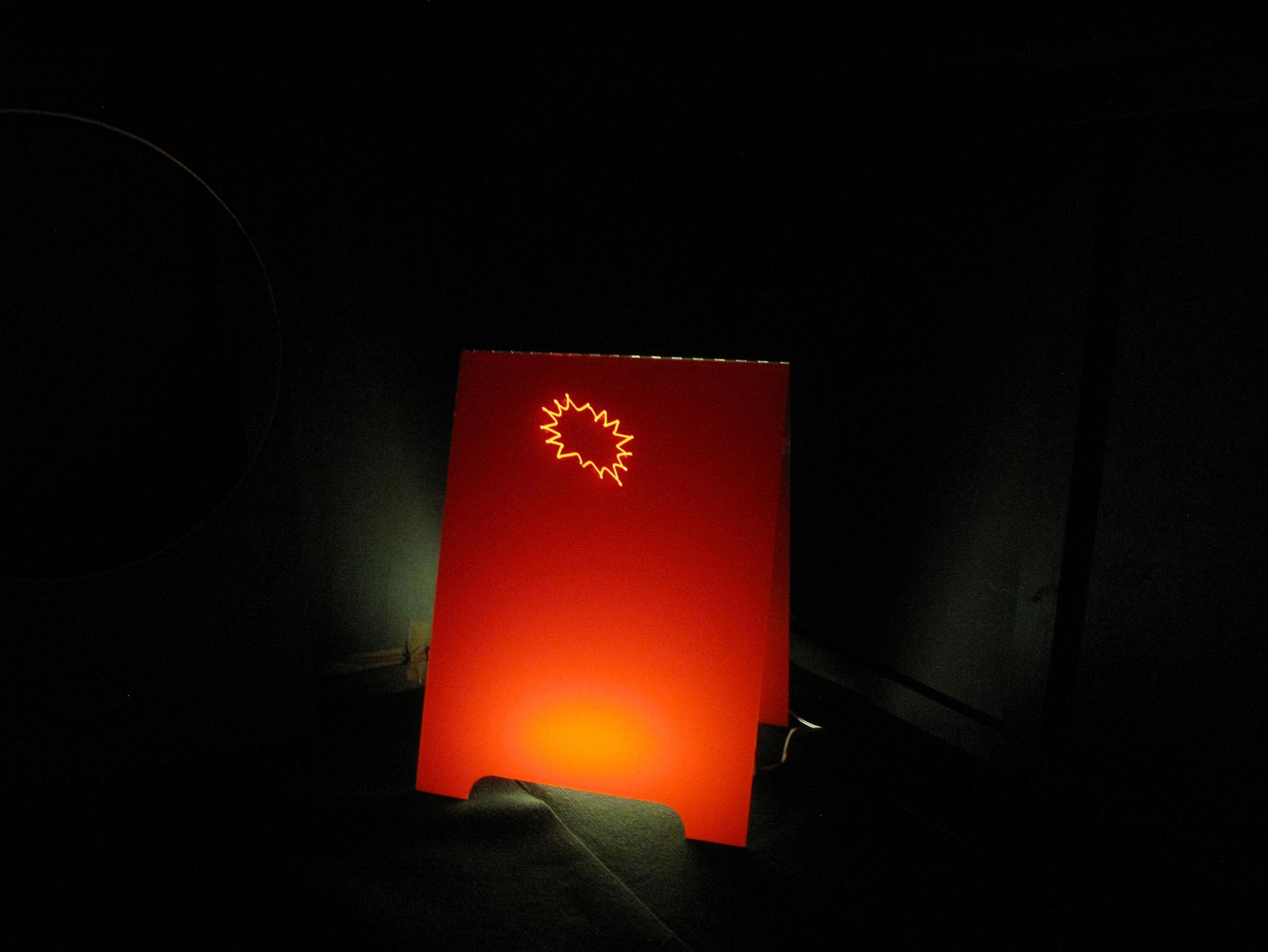
If you were lucky enough to have happened upon the gallery on a Saturday afternoon during the run of the exhibition, there is a chance you may have enjoyed a spaghetti dinner. Consistent with their brand, this notorious meal makes something magical from the most common ingredients. Humble (cheap), delicious (when done with care) and scalable (able to feed whoever walks in the door), the spaghetti dinner is at the heart and stomach of Instant Coffee. This meal (and its accompanying glass of wine) also served as a direct link to the history of the Western Front, where the first art events were not gallery shows, but dinners. The act of eating, drinking and socializing, then and now, continues to create Instant Coffee's desired effect.

- 1– Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn:
 Collaboration and its Discontents."

 Artforum. February 2006. p 178
- **2–** Ibid, p 180.

3- Andrea Fraser and Helmut
Draxler, "Services: A proposal
for an exhibition and a topic of
discussion." Lüneburg Kunstraum,
January 1994. Accessed: http://
artarchives.net/artarchives/
fraserservices.html (June 21,
2016).

I WILL ALLUAYS
REMEMBER HOR
RVDE AND
ARROGANT YOU
WERE.







If you lived here You'd be home by now

SI VIVIERAS AQUI, ESTARIAS EN CASA EN ESTE MOMENTO

INSTANT COFFEE, 2007

INSTANT COFFEE

Dave Dyment

Through a possible combination of improbable good luck and keen savvy, the interests and operating methods of Instant Coffee have run concurrent to the prevailing art world tides since their inception in 2000. Their modus operandi—working collectively, a dedication to relational aesthetics, their spirit of inclusivity and generosity, their use of alternative venues, parties, group activities, thrift-store chic, website listserves, the use of popular music iconography, the pathetic aesthetic—reads like a list of current trends of the last decade.

Unlike the slew of forgettable works from the era that hoped to mimic the service industry (I have vague memories of artists in uniform, setting up shops, restaurants, booths and bureaus), Instant Coffee *became* one. Pretending doesn't factor in to their practice. Their primary function, then and now, is the organization of large-scale artistic and social events that bring artists of many disciplines (musicians, filmmakers, writers, visual artists) together in combinations rarely encountered elsewhere.

A crudely collaged sign emphatically launched their endeavour, declaring "Sorry We're Open". Constructed from two store-bought Open and Closed signs, the piece looked like it was made with a kitchen knife and some scotch tape, but it somehow brilliantly managed to convey the quasi-sincerity of the collective and its intentions to behave as a business.

A used 1974 Holiday Cruiser trailer retrofitted with low-fi discotheque equipment became the headquarters. Economically designed as studio, presentation centre and party central, the mobile venue would hijack other art openings, simultaneously exploiting the built-in audience of a recognized institution and proposing an alternate way of working.

The offering of their space to other artists (first the trailer and eventually their home¹) became a key service that the collective provided, matched only by their weekly



email digests.² When invited in 2001 to exhibit the *Urban Disco Trailer* at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the collective used the exhibition as a way to sneak another 72 artists in the back door, curating three exhibitions to take place in the Trailer over the duration of the show.

One of these exhibitions took the form of a contest where they asked artists to design bumper stickers, which would be displayed on the Urban Disco Trailer and be available for sale in the gift shop. Visitors of the AGO were asked to vote to determine the most popular design. Similar projects followed where they commissioned artists to create stencils, posters and computer screensavers.

Large parties built around the trailer played host to semi-curated exhibitions of other artists' work. Jenifer Papararo's dual role as a curator both informed and was informed by these loosely themed projects. The impact of these early events, the call for quick and dirty art production, fostered a vibrant, highly productive, aware and supportive community of artists who were up for anything. IC's approach, and the impulsive art making that this encouraged was not without criticism. However, this spontaneous art production was not irresponsible. It created an atmosphere where artists could open their studios, take risks, rally ideas and respond to their peers with a refreshing immediacy.

Almost as though the intention were to franchise them, other *Urban Disco Trailers* soon followed. When

I worked at Art Metropole Jinhan Ko pitched them as a multiple. There were four of them now, and four is a multiple, he reasoned. The number eventually grew to five, though one of them has subsequently been crushed into a cube, but not before being loaded up with solicited items from other artists to serve as a time capsule of sorts.

Other multiples were created at the time, as though to fill the need of having product. Many of these early objects were simply items furnished with the Instant Coffee logo, similar to some of the 60's Fluxus multiples such as Flux Corsage (boxed seeds), Flux snakes (boxed spaghetti) and Flux Holes (boxed straws). A drinking flask with the phrase Instant Coffee stenciled onto it managed to transcend the banality of the gesture and become something else altogether. Their swag came in the form of flags, posters, pylons, patches, stickers and magnets. These items represent an exercise in branding, to be sure, but also served as a way one could buy into the Instant Coffee lifestyle. Later projects such as the Suitcase Radios, Disco-Danglers and Cooler Speakers moved away from the straight-ahead marketing and further emphasized this way-of-life.

Collective members share a common interest in antiquated and low-fi technologies, which informs both their installations and object production. They hosted slideshow events where artists were invited to bring images of work, found slides or use the media to tell

some sort of narrative. The slideshows continue today but began (perhaps coincidentally) the year that Kodak announced it would stop producing slide projectors. They published computer screen-saver programs by artists at a time when the screensaver also became obsolete.³

Their numerous poster projects served as promotional vehicles but also as venues to redefine and rearticulate their practice. One of their signature slogans—"Get Social or Get Lost"—always rubbed me the wrong way with it's 'my way or the highway' sentiment and its similarity to the ridiculous "Skate or Die" type dictums. But the Instant Coffee aphorism has a built in self-awareness that the others do not, a matter-of-factness that becomes practical cautionary advice. Other slogans include: There is no Romance in taking a risk; Instant Coffee does not have a monopoly on bad art; It doesn't have to be good to be meaningful.

The addition of new members to the group and the availability of increasingly larger spaces in international venues saw the introduction of more ambitious sculptural works, but always in aid of the larger goal of facilitating functional social environments.

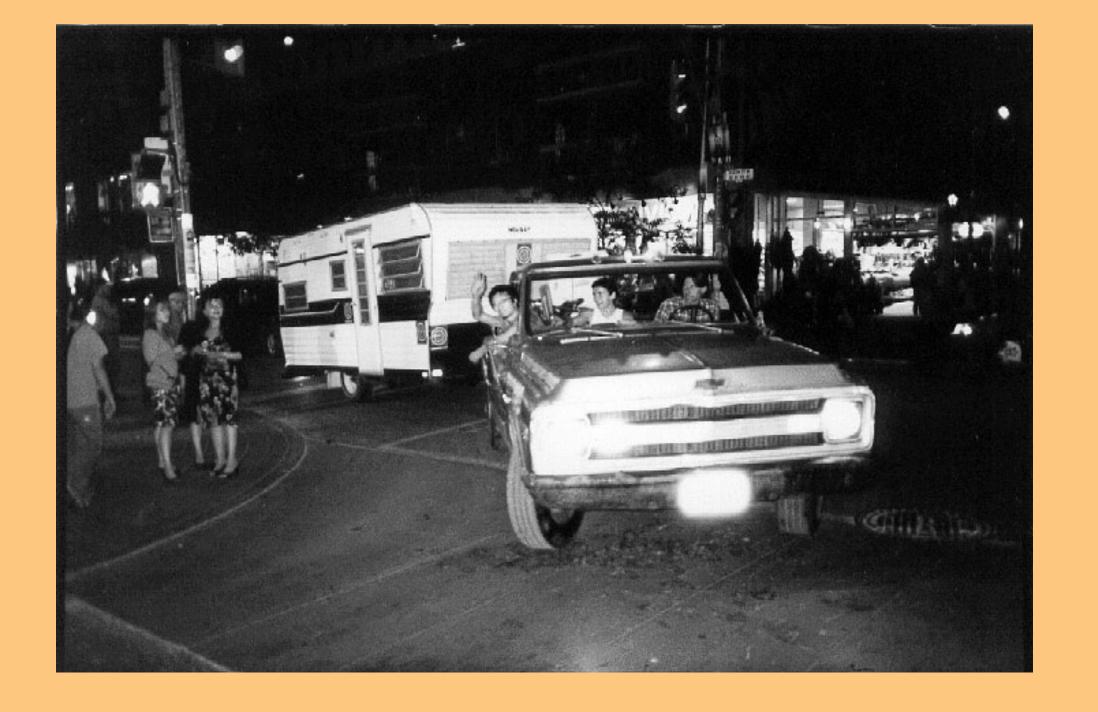
The *Instant Coffee Bass-Bed* consisted of a 6-mattress bed atop a structure that housed a large subwoofer which was connected to the DJ booth sound-system. The combination of the oversized bed and the vibrations of the bass provided a collective honeymoon suite type

72 INSTANT COFFEE DAVE DYMENT









experience. A coke mirror on a lazy susan and a night-side table as mouthwash bar helped facilitate the New Year's Eve celebration when the clock struck midnight.

Bass-Benches, Urban Disco Carts, a souped-up Discotron, a yurt and sauna, the DIY DJ Station, a disco-ball piñata, and more recently kitchen nooks have allowed the group's interest in forms of leisure that have fallen out of fashion to contribute to unique environments that bring people together in a shared social context. The collective was initially buoyed by French theorist Nicolas Bourriaud's catch-all term "Relational Aesthetics", but I suspect now feel haunted by it. The term was coined in 1996 and produced as a thin book two years later, though the English translation wasn't published until 2002, long after Instant Coffee had self-defined their practice. Currently experiencing the inevitable backlash in academic circles (following critical responses from Claire Bishop, Joe Scanlan, Jerry Saltz and others, plus a string of third-rate practitioners) the term is more of an albatross now.

I never felt that the group shared much in common with the artists in Bourriaud's essay. If anything, I thought the collective shared more with pre-RA works such as Tom Marioni's under-rated 1970 work *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends Is the Highest Form of Art*. Bourriaud's Postproduction from 2000, which relates the practice of the DJ to contemporary artists, was likely to have made a







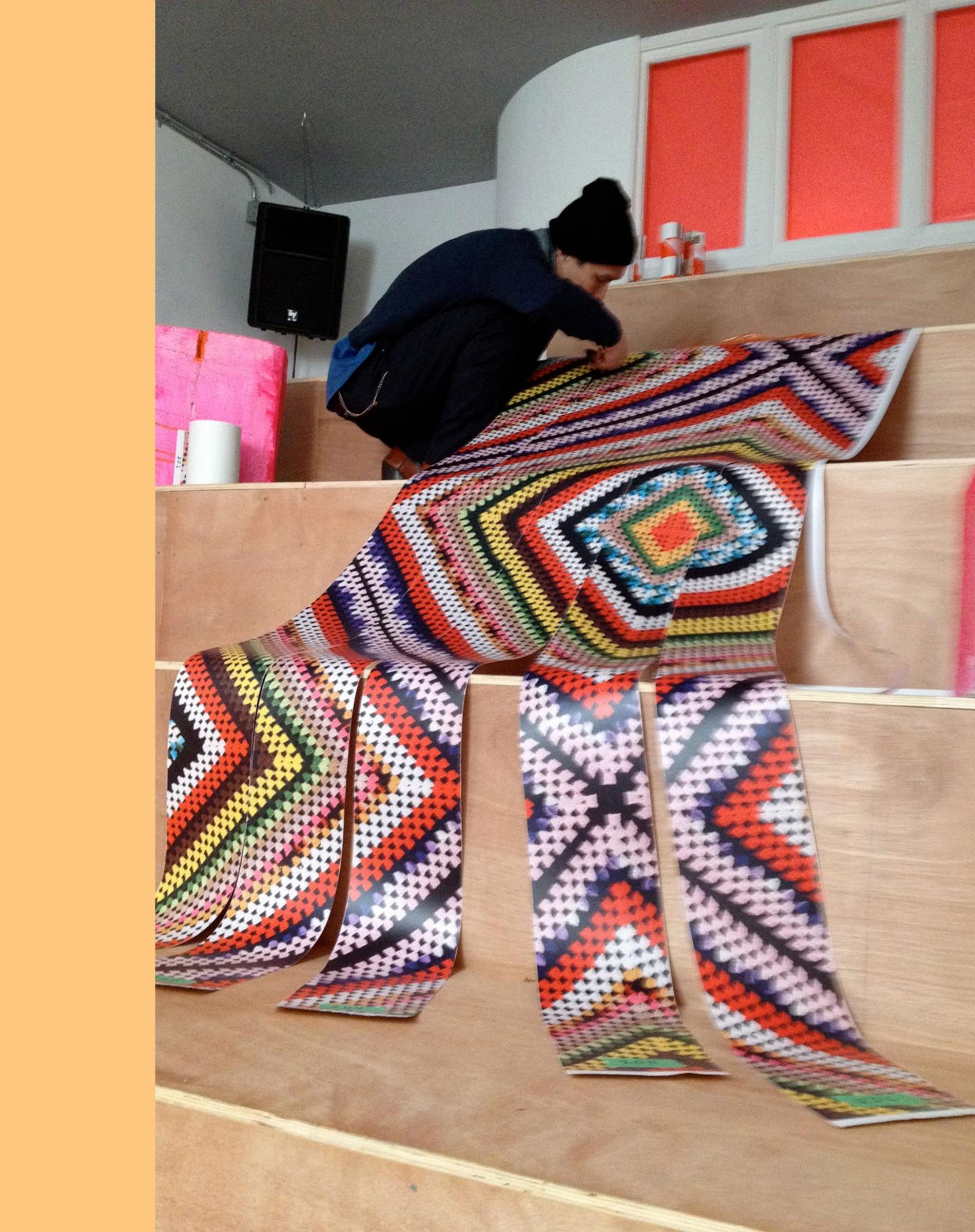
bigger impact on the group's working methods.

One of the criticisms of "Relational Aesthetics" is that there is no substantial way to measure success. Were the conversations at a Rirkrit Tiravanija event any more meaningful than at the Thai restaurant down the street, for example? The larger impact of Instant Coffee would also be difficult to assess if the collective wasn't now split between two cities (Cecilia Berkovic, Kate Monro and Jon Sasaki remain in Toronto and Jinhan Ko, Khan Lee, Kelly Lycan and Jenifer Papararo in Vancouver). It is not hyperbolic to suggest that this diaspora in 2004 led to a fracturing of the current Toronto arts community.⁴

Being dependent on a number of variables (especially the participation of others) can often lead to failed experiments and Instant Coffee's success is certainly inconsistent. But when it gets it right it's brilliant, and when it doesn't it wears its mediocrity proudly. The moniker itself serves as the first of many manifestos that address this issue head-on: instant coffee is a substitute for the real thing, but it's cheaper, faster and more readily available. Aficionados may object to the taste, but you can count on it having a longer shelf life.

- 1— They named their studio/home

 Workplace and answered the phone
 with a courteous and professional
 "Workplace, how may I help you?"
- events to their enormous email list helped place them in the centre of the scene, certainly, but it also provided a free service to local artists and institutions, services for which others charge hundreds of dollars. This service alone solidified a Toronto scene. A biweekly snapshot of who, what and where continues to facilitate a more active and aware audience in Toronto and now also Montreal, Vancouver and Calgary.
- While often more sophisticated and visually compelling than early video art, screensaver graphics have been strictly novelty features for almost a decade as newer screens are considerably more resistant to burn-in.
- 4— I've had a number of discussions of the difference between the 'scene' now and a few years ago. The change in Instant Coffee's structure and the folding of Lola Magazine are often cited as the two major factors.







WISH YOU WERE HERE

Me encantaria que estuvieras aqui

INSTANT COFFEE, 2007

AN INSTANT QUALITATIVE SOCIETY



(...) in a developed society needs are not only quantitative (...) but also qualitative: the need for a faceted and free development of human beings' skills, the need for information, communication and a human community, the need for emancipation not only from exploitation but also from coercion and isolation at work and during leisure time.¹

In 1968 The Moderna Museet in Stockholm hosted The Model – A Model for a Qualitative Society in the main gallery, a grand installation of boxes, wooden constructions, paint and tools—free for kids to use. Conceived by Palle Nielsen and executed by himself with other artists, designers and architects, the exhibition questioned the very foundations of our society, how we understand and organize work, play and come together as community. Looking at images from this event it is hard to imagine they come from the main public museum in Stockholm. With kids playing without any supervision, and the construction built in every direction, seemingly without any plan, it is a far cry from the countless safety measures public institutions are subjected to today. The Model was only for children under 18, adults could watch from outside through monitors. Inside, the kids were roaming masters, continuing to build and rebuild the structure with a massive pile of materials, paint and tools. In its aftermath, this event has been viewed in several ways: as institutional critique, as part of the museum's children centred outreach program and as a political testing ground, which inferred an activist critique of the everyday. The latter is the dimension that Nielsen intended.

Although born out of completely different time frames and political and geographical contexts, a number of parallels can be drawn between Nielson's intentions and Instant Coffee's mode of operation. These

include: the critical investigation of the everyday, projects as political provocation, play as a productive force and how the collective spirit can usurp the persona of the mystified artist—all leading to an anti-elitist concept of art.

Collective Spirit

The all-encompassing collectivity in building and defining *The Model*, both by hundreds of visiting children and by the collective decision making between Nielsen and his fellow builders, completely subverted the idea of singular authorship. *The Model* was inclusive and the very incarnation of a process-oriented concept of art and "appears as a radical critique of the way institutions and markets fetishise the artistic persona and signature."²

Palle Nielsen was deeply involved with the political movements of the late 60's, and *The Model* was one way of rethinking the forms of political engagement—engagement that often took form of mass demonstration or squatting. *The Model* proposes another form and questions what happens when people take matters in their own hands. The collective working method is



closely connected to Nielsens goals with his projects, they cannot be conceived in any other way, because democracy, interaction and how non-authoritarian societies can be formed is the very core of his interest.

In her text *Polyphonous Language and construction* of identity: its dynamic and its crux, curator Katharina Schlieben asks: "Is there something like an implicit, and explicit language, or a polyphony, within a collective structure?" Stressing the importance of the context in which one uses terms like collective, network, teamwork, collaboration and cooperation she points out that the term "collective process" is a term used both for activist action and for neo-liberal work agendas. Thus it is of significant importance to "differentiate and reposition (these terms) with regard to their contextual usage in everyday language."

With a varied number of participants in their group, Instant Coffee always appear as one, sharing authorship, but at the same time making use of their individual skills. The collective processes shaping their projects are sometimes embedded in the final output, and other times their projects set a stage for the collective process to include visitors or a general public. Rather than the clearly political output central to Nielsen's method, Instant Coffee has a more open approach that evades definition and insists on open-endedness. Maybe one can say that rather than being victim of an repressing neo-

liberal working logic, Instant Coffee's mode of operation is clearly situated within that logic. They know, as we all know, there is no outside, we are always somehow embedded in the logic of the times we are living in. This approach is underlined by their use of language and expressions borrowed from commercials, often taken to the extreme. Rather than a clear position of resistance or opposition, Instant Coffee plays around with the language stemming from the economic logic of our times. Instant Coffee has no clear subversive agenda that we can find, but rather try to use pervasive commercialized language to their own agenda. They fill seemingly empty commercial slogans with meaning and turn sites of brief encounters into real encounters.

The Everyday⁵

Instant Coffee makes strategic use of everyday materials and contexts. In 2007 they first presented *Nooks*, a replica of the kitchen nook from the home of an Instant Coffee member. As this domestic form was well-tested, Instant Coffee was confident in its function as an everyday setting. Instant Coffee writes, "This nook



has a magic that seems to come from its incidental, but near perfect, dimensions. It is the perfect place for conversation. Time seems to slow down when inside it, attention spans more focused and social engagement natural." The *Nooks* served as sites to engage audiences in event-based activities such as slide lectures and readings, video screenings, meetings, magazine launch and dinners, but were always open to simply be used. In one presentation, two of the nooks were connected via a microphone in one linked to a speaker mounted in another. There was also camera surveillance, where those in one nook could watch on a small scrappy black and white monitor the going-ons in another. They were staged for people to lose time. For the art experience to turn into a normative, more mundane moment, releasing the art object and the viewer from expectations of productivity.

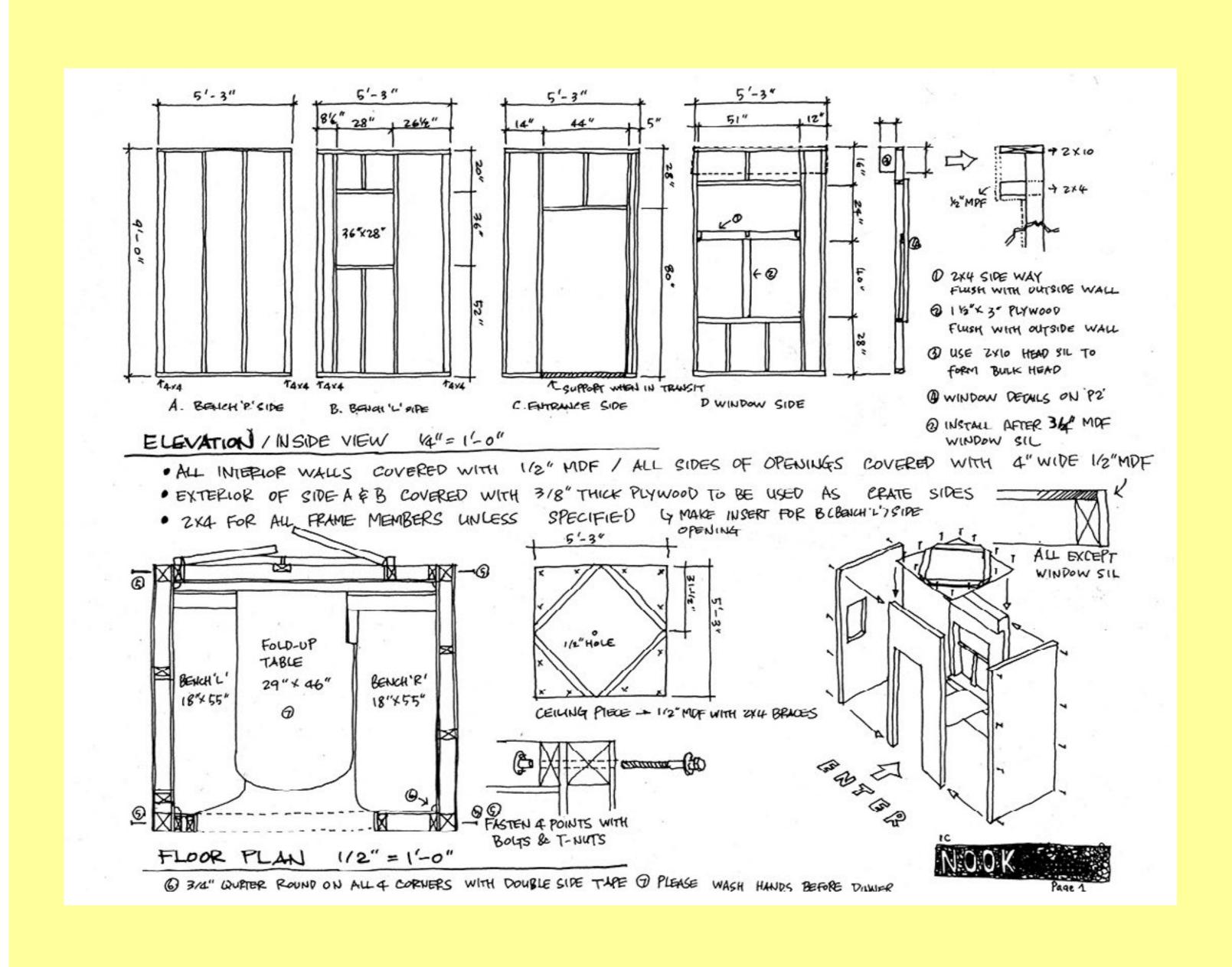
The materials used in an art work and what type of setting is established, are never arbitrary, rather they set the stage for what type of engagement is possible—establishing power relations between the artwork and the viewer. By deliberately using non-authorative materials and colors, and by reframing spaces for engagement, Instant Coffee establishes a different set of power relations within an institution. The artist Thomas Hirschorn refers to this type of approach as making art politically: "To make art politically means to choose

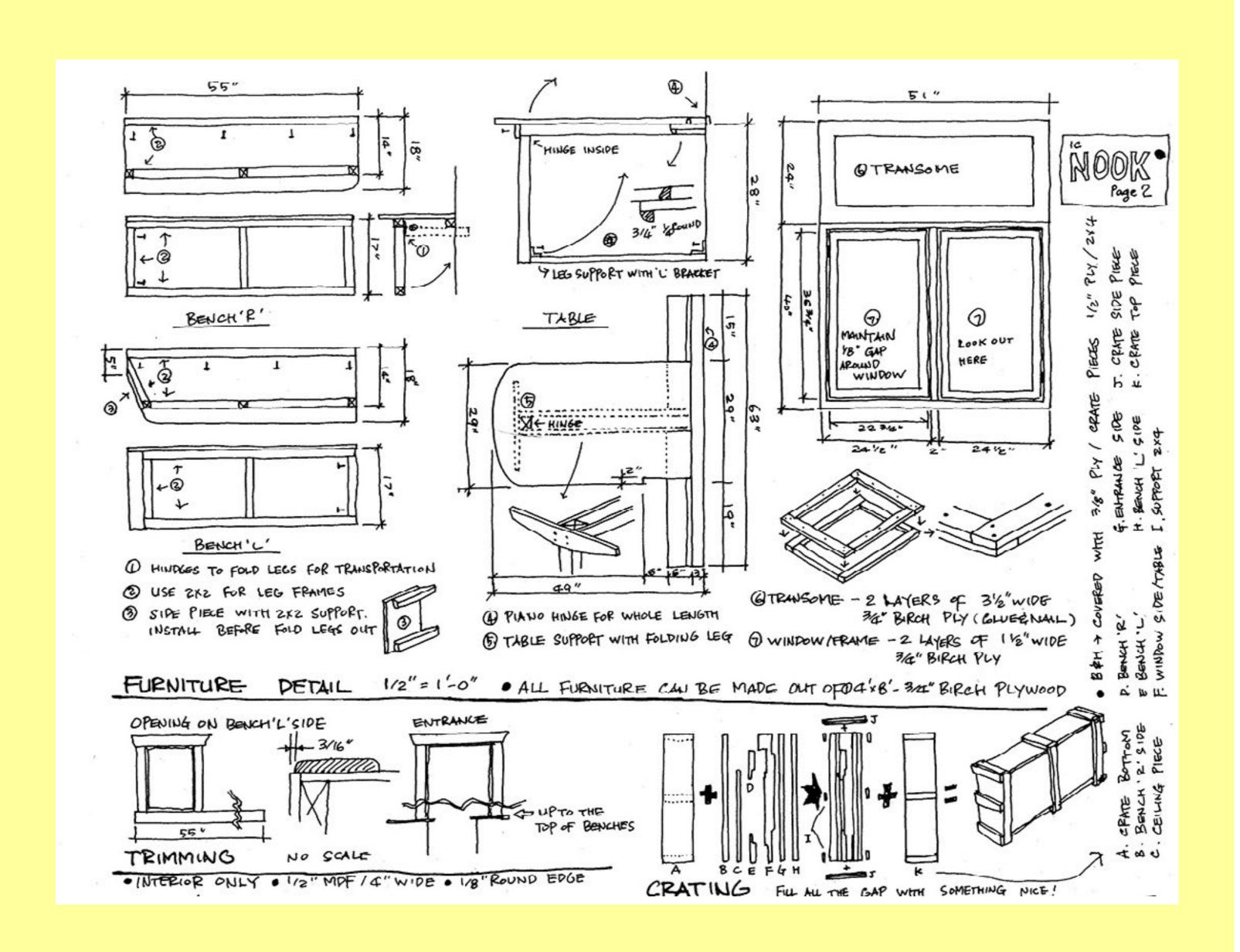
materials that do not intimidate, a format that doesn't dominate, a device that does not seduce. To make art politically is not to submit to an ideology or to denounce the system, in opposition to so-called 'political art'." Nooks was built of everyday materials and engaged the audience-as-participant in an everyday setting, thus undermining authorative patterns often established within art institutions.

Modernist thinkers thought of the artwork as having an anthropomorphized presence. With this "stage presence" the art object, as the subject, establishes an authoritative relationship between the art object and the viewer. The institution also creates its own sanctioned modes of behaviour within art spaces: no running, no touching, speaking with soft voices. Visitors are encouraged to be completely passive. While loitering (standing or waiting around idly or without apparent purpose) is discouraged in other public spaces, it is often encouraged in art spaces.

Play

Palle Nielsen's *The Model* invited children to run, touch, build, be destructive and play; and through its structure and materials it offered a completely new way





of behaving in the museum. According to Pontus Hultén, the director of Moderna Museet at the time Nielsen presented this work, "The Model was concerned with the meaning of the social and subjective change that the playing child generates within the machinery of society. As such, the event was nothing short of a mass utopia of art activism, aimed at applying an anti-elitist concept of art for the creation of a collectivist human being. The result, as one reviewer put it, was 'almost frightening for adults'." Hultén, who later was part of creating Palais de Tokyo in Paris, was invested in challenging what a museum could be.

In *The Model*, children were encouraged as creators rather than hushed into compliance with the authority of the established culture. Child's play was not an autonomous activity preoccupying the child with harmless chores, completely unrelated to the rest of society, rather play was viewed as something that instigated a social change within society.

Charles Fourier (1772–1837) was a French philosopher and early socialist thinker. In his work on children and education he studied how children behaved and developed their tastes. Fourier found that children tended to like the following activities: "Rummaging or inclination to handle everything, examine everything, look through everything, to constantly change occupations" and "create industrial commotion and

taste for noisy occupations." Their play appeared highly productive. In his thinking about a utopian society Fourier drew from the the constructive energies of children at play. Walter Benjamin, in his *Passagenwerk* or *Arcades Project* (an unfinished work about the city life of Paris) writes on Fourier: "[t]o have instituted play as the canon of a labor no longer rooted in exploitation is one of the great merits of Fourier." Likewise, in Nielsen's *The Model* play was not seen merely as something that could inspire work or make one think of work in another way, rather play was regarded as something productive, as labor in itself, and also an activity that created a public sphere.

Instant Coffee, like Nielsen, not only sets the stage for the audience to play, but play is essential to the very making of the project. Anyone who has been to an Instant Coffee project or has had the pleasure of working with them, knows that the resulting installations come to life with an almost magical ease—at least it seems this way looking from the outside. Improvisation, a sensitivity for materials, combined with utility and the practical ability to use materials at hand, makes the installations come together in a way that invites usage, sociability and comfort.

In several of Instant Coffee's projects the notion of play is enacted through multiple iterations, for example the *Light Bar* which has been presented in a number

of different versions. In its early phase in Bergen, Norway, it was a plastic igloo-like structure with a long arched entrance way. Installed at Landmark at Bergen Kunsthall it was only used at night. During the day it was hoisted up, letting people walk underneath it instead of inside. The structure was a space for gathering, where talks, slide-shows and DIY online karaoke happened, and was complete with cushioned overturned bucket seating. In the Vancouver 2010 version of Light Bar karaoke was once again presented, this time set up by Seattle curator Eric Frederickson who said, "Malcolm McLaren recently wrote, "[t]oday there are two words that sum up the culture: 'authenticity' is one, and the other ... 'karaoke'!" The Vancouver edition also launched a magazine, presented Djs and live music, art performances and lectures and was part of a collaborative project Bright Light by fourteen arts organizations in Vancouver, during the Olympics.

Light Bar uses the idea of play as an instigating force to create a temporary community space for a presentation, talk or simply to dance and sing karaoke. As such these projects are created collectively, started by Instant Coffee, but open from there.

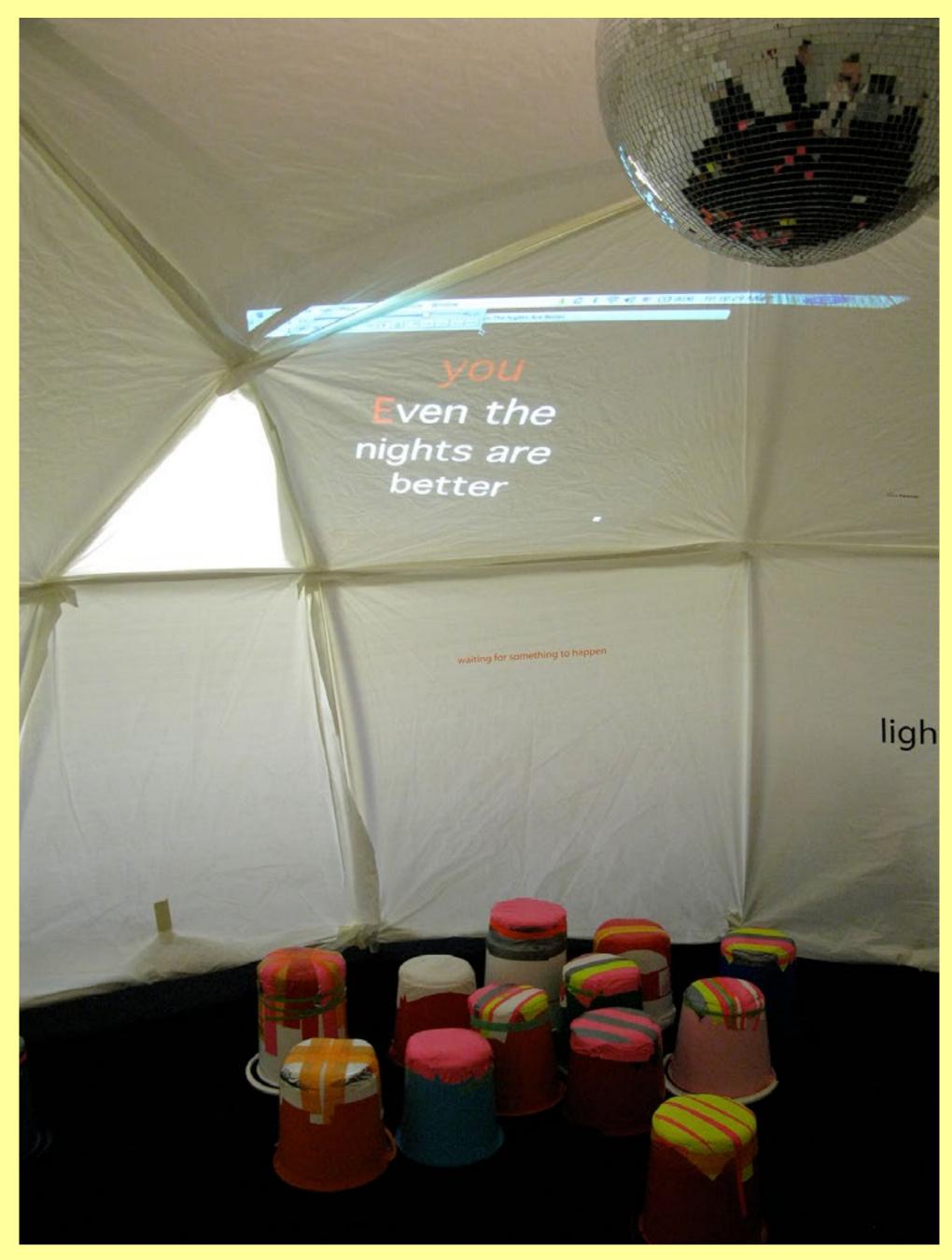




An Instant Qualitative Society

Instant Coffee operates away from the politicized language and agency of Palle Nielsen, but their collective, playful work is still critical of notions of artistic identity and the art world's tendency to fetishize and capitalize on the mythological role of the artist. Instant Coffee have a particular sense of irony—a serious irony that refuses to be dismissed. Similarly, their slogan, "Feeling so much, yet doing so little" utilizes commercialized language and sentiments in an authentic way. Humourous, with a somewhat melancholic touch, it should not be misunderstood as light heartedness.

The social element within in the social projects of Instant Coffee, should also not be interpreted as mere conviviality, but rather about creating temporary collectives or societies. The *Nooks* and other Instant Coffee projects serves both as sculptural installation and social settings for what one could call qualitative engagement with other people. They create for a somewhat short time a model for a temporary public sphere, or an instant qualitative society, if you like.





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 Nielsen's The Model A Model for
 a Qualitative Society, Barcelona:
 MACBA, 2010.
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- 3— Schlieben, Katharina,
 "Polyphonous Language and Construction of Identity: its Dynamic and its Crux" in *Taking the Matter into Common Hands*, editors: Johanna Billing, Maria Lind and Lars Nilsson, 32. London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007.
- **4–** Ibid, p.33
- The everyday is a problematic concept that ideally should be treated more in depth than what is room for in this setting. In his seminal *Critique of Everyday Life* Henri Lefebvre writes "So to reach reality we must tear down

- the veil, the veil that is forever being born and reborn of everyday life, and which masks everyday life along with its deepest and loftiest ambitions", Lefebvre, Henry, *Critique of Everyday Life*, translated by Moore, John. p 57. London: Verso, 1991.
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BOMANGEIN TAKING A BISK INSTANT COFFEE LOYES EYERYONE





Dave Dyment

Dave Dyment is an artist and curator, based in Toronto. He is represented by MKG127, and his work can be seen at www.dave-dyment.com

Caitlin Jones

Caitlin Jones is the Executive Director of the Western Front Society in Vancouver, BC. Prior to this appointment she had a combined curatorial and conservation position at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and was the Director of Programming at the Bryce Wolkowitz Gallery in New York. She was a staff writer for Rhizome and her other writings on contemporary art and new media have appeared in a wide range of periodicals and other international publications including, The Believer, Mousse, Cory Arcangel: A New Fiesta in the Making (exhibition catalog), Nam June Paik: Global Groove 2004 (exhibition catalog), the Documents of Contemporary Art series published by Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press and Mass Effect published by the New Museum.

Rakett

Visual artists and curators Åse Løvgren and Karolin Tampere collaborate as Rakett (2003 -), an ongoing mobile platform for various activities, ranging from curatorial practice to collaborative artistic projects. Rakett projects often function as lively, temporary

platforms for collaborative, often interdisciplinary, production; where the role of the initiator/curator is to not only to create a framework and a stage, but also to bring together different cultural producers, to create a moment of potentiality. Implicitly and explicitly, their work touch on a range of questions around (co) authorship, (im)material production, the role of artist and curator, and the potential of mobile and changeable platforms in the institutional infrastructure for art.

Rakett has presented projects and exhibitions at Bildmuseet (Umeå), Palais de Tokyo (Paris), Murmansk Art Museum, alongside temporary projects in peripheral geographical locations, the public realm and self initiated artist run exhibition spaces.

They were granted curators in residence at ISCP, New York, IASPIS and Baltic Art Centre. Rakett has given workshops and lectured amongst other places at the National Academy of the Arts in Oslo, Odense, Bergen and Reykjavik, and held presentations amongst other places at Pro QM, Sparwasser HQ (Berlin), UKS (Oslo), Western Front (Vancouver), Bergen Kunsthall and CCA (Riga). www.rakett.biz

Post Projects

Post Projects is a Vancouver-based graphic design studio founded in 2011. Post works for artists, institutions and corporations, locally and internationally, on a wide range of platforms and diciplines. www.postprojects.com

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IMAGE CREDITS

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POST SCRIPT—Instant Coffee as a collective was founded in late 1999. Our membership has expanded and contracted over the years, shifting as projects demand and geographies allow, incorporating individuals into our fold for their skill and interest. Each have an impact in what and how the collective moves and produces, but always with the mind to perform to Instant Coffee. We have defined ourselves in numerous ways over the years with an understanding that Instant Coffee has an identity beyond any individual that makes up the collective. There are characteristics that are definitively Instant Coffee and when one works within the collective those attributes manner the way they participate and what they contribute. There is no quantitative list of these qualities and only rarely do we articulate our traits with direct and definitive resolve, but we know that one is never enough and as a colour we are fluorescent pink. We play with inclusion and exclusion equally. When we say "we love everyone" we know this is an impossibility. We set ourselves to fail with the best intensions.

Instant Coffee has been Kate Monro, Stephen Crowhurst, Cecilia Berkovic, Timothy Comeau, Jon Sasaki, Emily Hogg and Kelly Lycan, and still is Jinhan Ko, Khan Lee and Jenifer Papararo

Instant Coffee

Instant Coffee
Feeling So Much Yet Doing So Little

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