



*SPECTACLE*

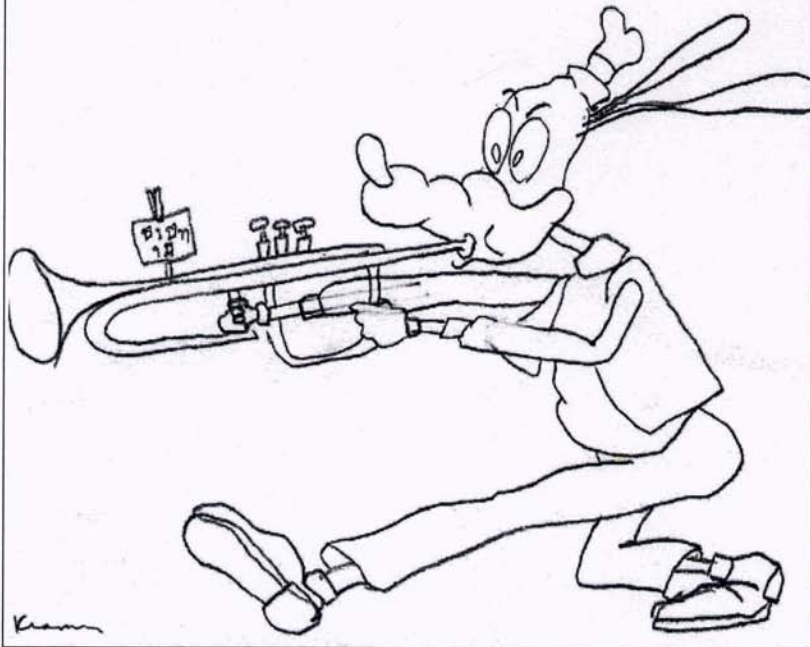


# SPECTACLE

Peter Bowyer • David Kramer

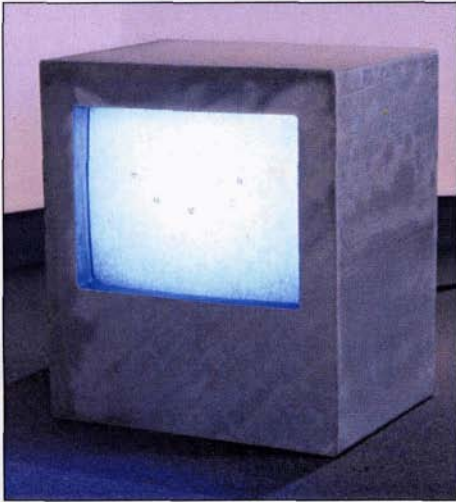
Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center  
November 10 to December 22, 2001

Looking back, I'm trying  
to find some memory,  
some thought, that  
isn't something  
I saw on TV.



## The Set-Up or The Recognition of Our Common Lostness

Somewhere between the conception and execution of the exhibition *Spectacle*, the original intent of the title has long wafted away. At the point of the project's inception, we were nearing the end of the century and millennium, so perhaps everything in our culture felt like a spectacle, the impending rapturous end of the world. Maybe it was a final stab at 20<sup>th</sup> century irony, knowing from the beginning that the exhibition would be concise rather than visually overwrought. Maybe I was thinking about how David Kramer always makes a shameless spectacle of himself and how Peter Bowyer never does. The typical American spectacle meets the typical Canadian introspectacle.



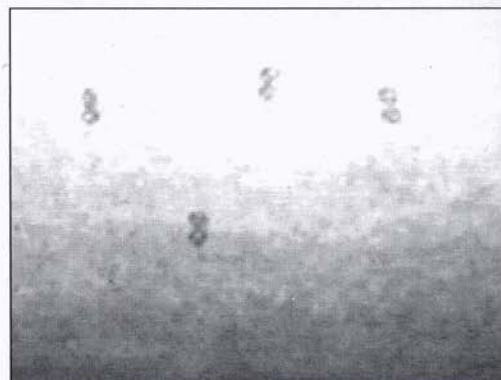
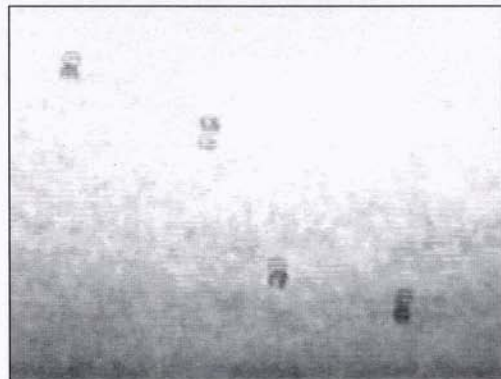
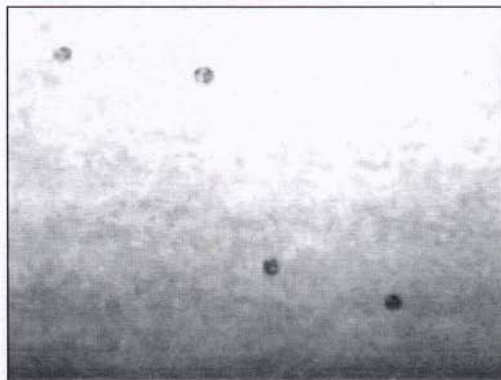
In Peter Bowyer's installation *Sparkles*, a bank of galvanized steel stadium seating faces a matching television console. Alluding to an "arena experience," Bowyer's bleachers focus a line of sight toward the most understated of spectacles. Upon the accompanying video monitor, a delicate scene plays itself out: four tiny drawn cubes crawl vertically up the screen and tumble down again in a repeatedly looped motion. The ambient rumble of idling refrigerator trucks provides a muted soundtrack and the remainder of the screen appears underexposed, grainy and grey. The gentle rolling of the images is alluring and hypnotic, drawing the audience deeper into a moment of anticipation the longer it tolerates the process of viewing.

Like Bowyer's other sculptures, and the drawings included in *Spectacle*, *Sparkles* hybridizes the style and sensation of the corporatized landscape that has been burgeoning for the past couple decades. As with all his work, Bowyer transforms

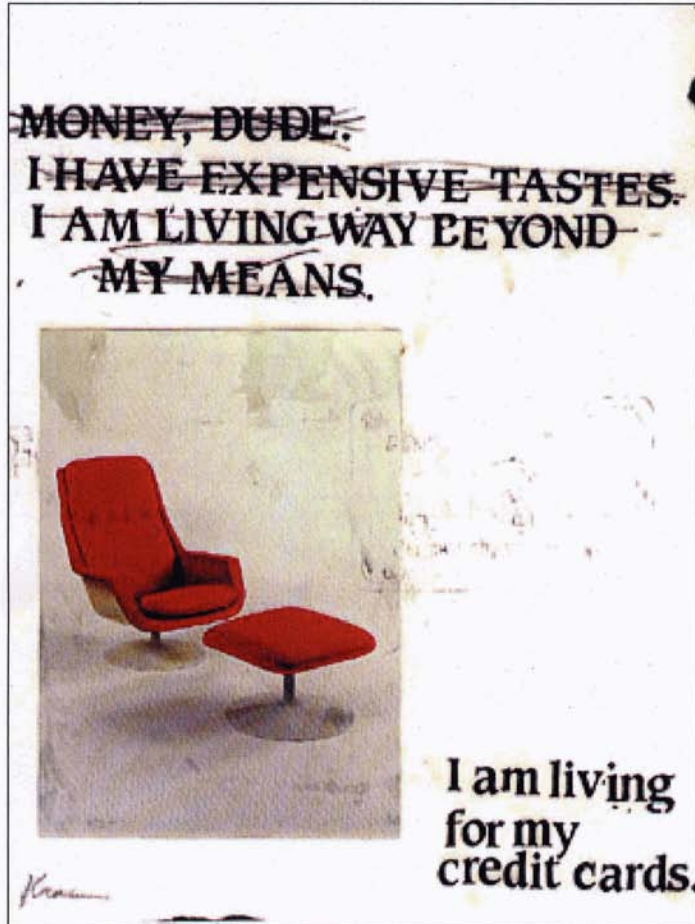
a "future is now" anxiety into a series of concise visual gestures. His swatch of bleachers collapse the arena experience into a more intimate equation. It becomes a question of one's personal relationship to the spectacle viewed. It speaks to one's desire to view, rather than the brash specifics of the spectacle being viewed.

Bowyer's seating is spacious and functional but is also contrived to frustrate comfort. Cold stadium seating is a common cultural experience, a discomfort that is typically exchanged for a glut of entertainment. For many decades, high schools across North America have shared the common community of the "bleacher crowd." Bleachers adjacent to schools are symbolic sites of non-action. They are where the slackers, the bored and the uninspired gravitate to bum cigarettes and revel in each other's desire for life to begin for real. As we watch Bowyer's rudimentary cartoon for *Sparkles*, we become aware that we are spending an inordinate amount of time waiting for something more to occur. The issue in Bowyer's installation is the anticipation of spectacle, like a continually-understated prelude to something that may never happen.

In David Kramer's *Cloud 9*, a sofa is shaped like the number nine. It has large fluffy white cushions, pierced by two rainbow-colored cylindrical platforms. The large round form at the center is a light source and a backrest. The top is a Plexiglas table covered with liquor bottles, beer bottles and remnants of junk food containers. The cylinder at the bottom of the 9 supports a television on which plays a loop of edited workout videos taken from television alternating with sequences of the artist at work and play.



Unlike other recent sofa works Kramer has produced, *Cloud 9* is uncertain about its functionality. Not really large enough to fall asleep upon, not quite spacious enough for a makeout couch, it cuts against the idyllic allusion typically associated with wafting upon cloud nine. It offers an ease that it simultaneously confounds. It appears to contain all the fuel to fulfill a certain

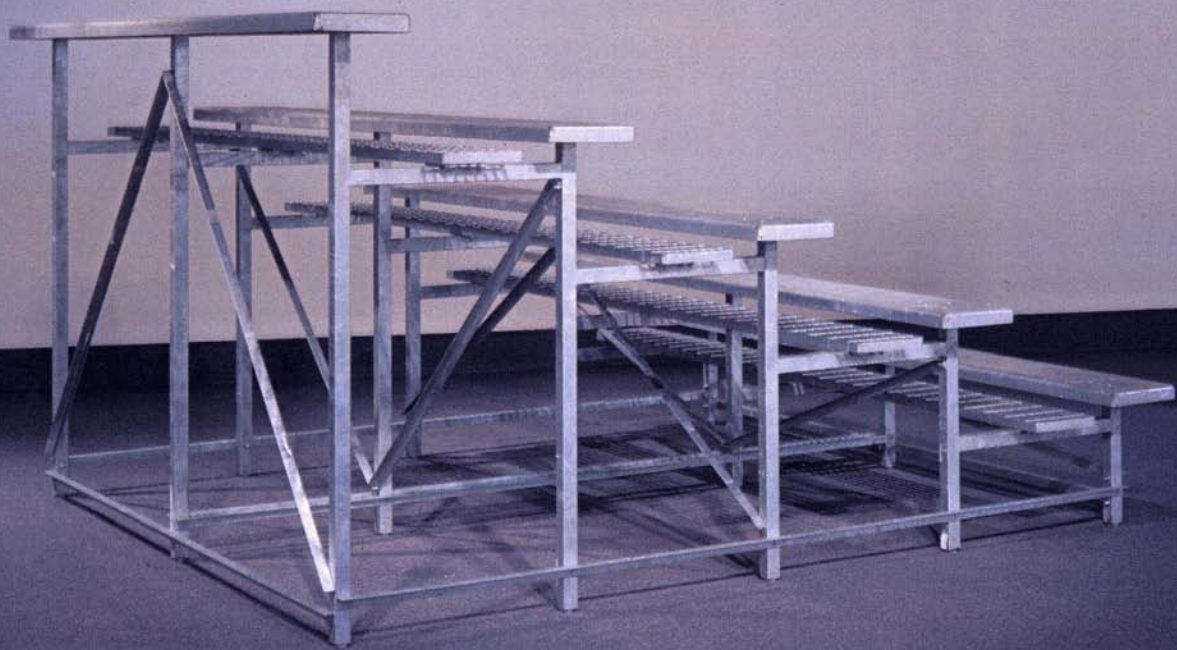


quotient of male fantasies: food, drink, visual stimulation. Its title implies a space of serene reflection. It looks promising, but there is no way to truly relax, no room to genuinely recline.

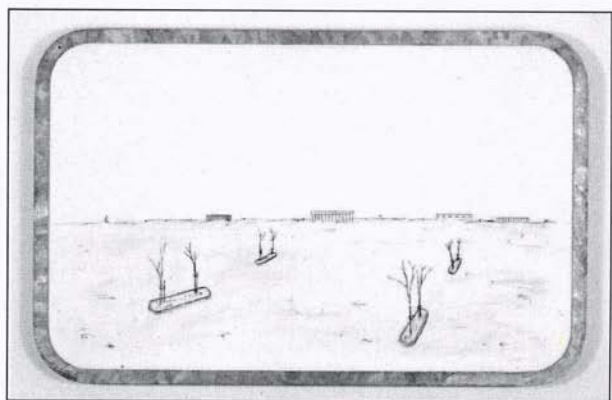
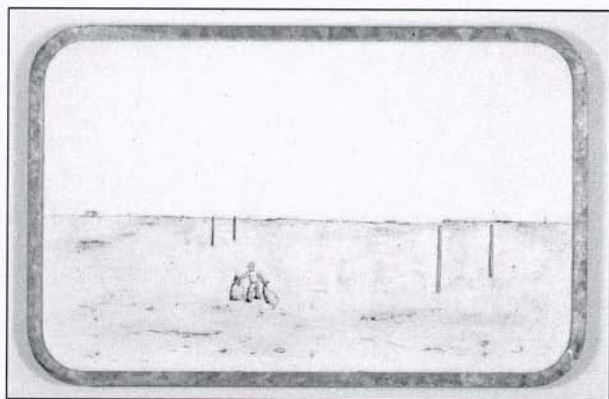
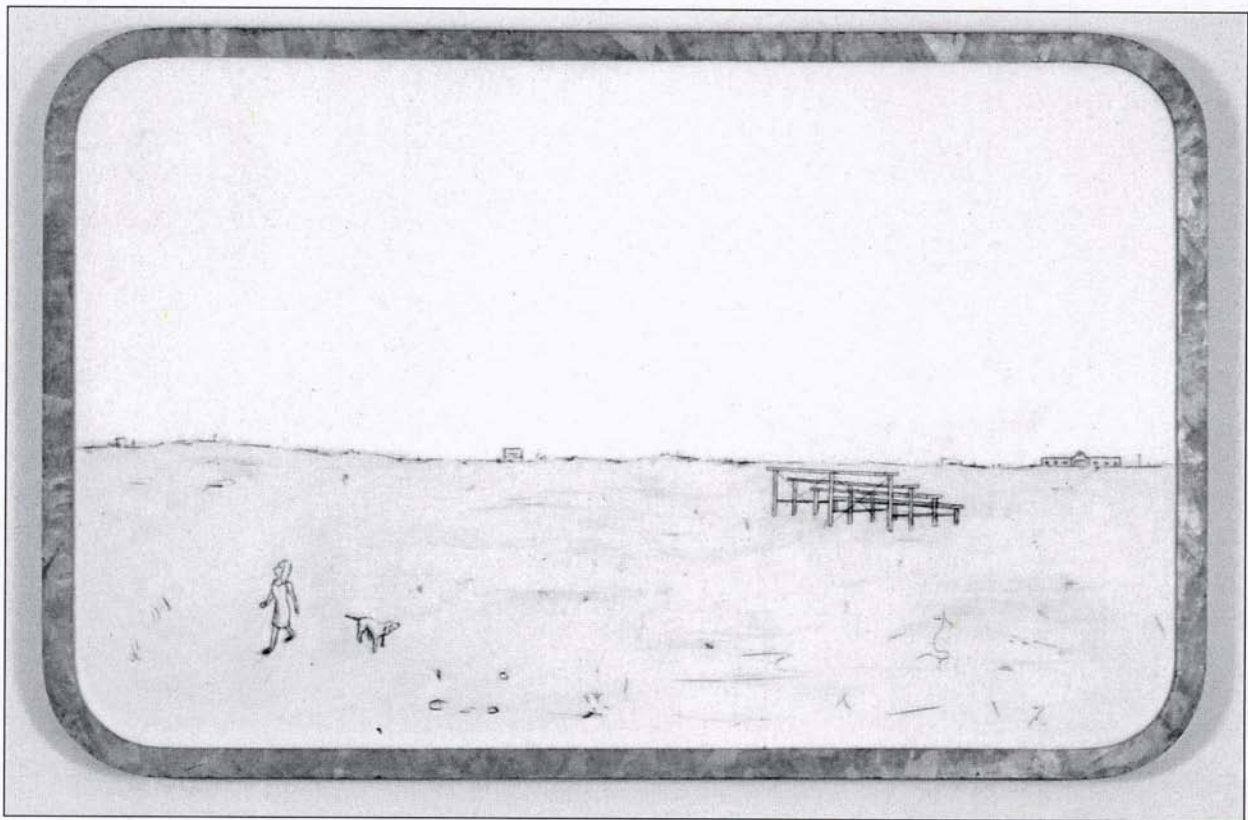
Kramer's accompanying video is a bizarre mélange of hard, beautiful bodies sampled from tv workout shows intercut with sequences of the artist in his studio, letting it all hang out. Wearing only running shoes and Bermuda shorts, he explains that he is building a stage to be illuminated from below. He does so and soon enough is dancing unabashedly across his personal disco dance floor. Michael Jackson soon joins Kramer and, eventually, Kramer enters MJ's surreal video world, an image both deeply self-deprecating and filled with shameless joy.

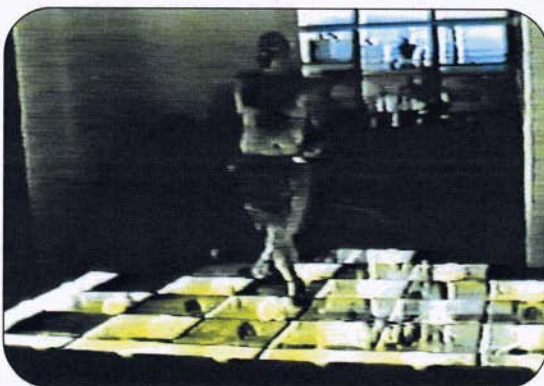
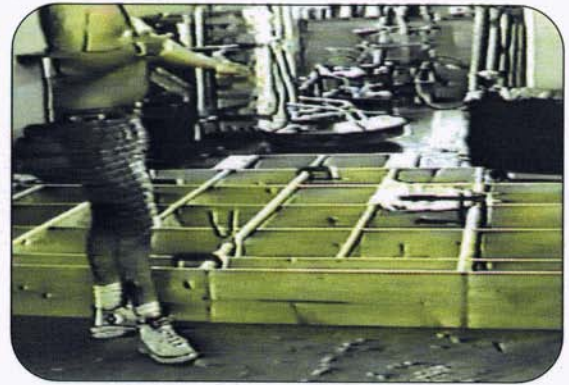
Cutting back occasionally to the sampled workout videos, we are offered other images of the artist, as when he preens his best strongman pose in front of a bathroom mirror. It is a moment of "torso reassurance" that every man

over 35 knows well and ends after awhile with a heartburn burp. After more hardbodies, one of the last images is that of Kramer in sedate repose. On a lawn chair in front of a beach backdrop. A softbody in a faux exotic setting, a reminder that *Cloud 9* is a state of mind. Paradise can be yours!









Without intentionally critiquing media-saturated culture, Bowyer and Kramer nonetheless create situations that remark upon our broader cultural context of looking and being looked at. The media-wrought world is not the specific subject of the works, but it is the scenario against which our various emotional and intellectual responses are gauged and brought into relief. Bowyer's bleachers remind us of a communally-shared experience mediated via the tv screen while Kramer's *mis en scène* reiterates a self-contained environment of passive fulfillment.

The scenarios of Bowyer and Kramer are somewhat ill at ease, less arenas of spectacle than of pathos. They draw us into recognizing the inherent absurdity to the spectacle of life we are living and watching. They describe moments of empathy with the viewer, an articulation of the familiar and sometimes ludicrous bond that connects us all.

There is a reminder here that we are not living happy endings and funny punchlines. We are more likely living the joke that leads up to the punch line, the set-up without the desired dénouement. In his first column for the *The Village Voice* in 1981, critic Peter Schjeldahl called it "the recognition of our common lostness." It is a phrase that reiterates that our experiences of art and life are not self-absorbed dramas of existential angst. Rather, it is commonality of experience and sensation that draws us together. On a bleacher, a sofa, in front of a television.

John Massier  
Visual Arts Curator





Born in Toronto, Peter Bowyer studied sculpture at St. Martins School of Art in London, England from 1976-1979. His mixed media works blending urban and pastoral themes are known through numerous solo exhibitions in Toronto over the last twenty years. Noted for large anonymous sculptural objects and installations that combine drawings and institutional furniture, his work has explored areas of the evolving urban day-dream and corporate landscape. His work has also been included in group exhibitions in Los Angeles, London and Madrid. A solo exhibition featuring his installation *Further Arrangement* was presented at The Power Plant in Toronto in 1995.

David Kramer was born in NYC in 1963, where he currently lives with his wife, Susan Mitchell and their son Martin. Kramer has a BA in Fine Arts from The George Washington University (1985) and an MFA in Sculpture from Pratt Institute (1997). Recent solo exhibitions of his work include the Robert Birch Gallery in Toronto, Roebing Hall Gallery in Brooklyn, and The Southern Alberta Art Gallery, in Lethbridge, Alberta. His recent performances include the Atlantic Theater, the Whitney Museum-Phillip-Morris Gallery in NYC, and Strutts Gallery in New Brunswick, Canada.

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