



KELLY MARK

TORONTO

Since 1997, Kelly Mark has been diligently punching in and out of her studio, recording her time spent making art. The Toronto artist plans to continue until 2032, when she turns 65 and can retire. No matter that her production operates outside the blue-collar realm or that she receives no hourly wage. Besides, what would determine her income? Yet, her display of timecards in steel racks as sculpture begs the question: what defines an artist at the turn of the twenty-first century? Especially in a fickle and competitive art world in which access to collectors and public funding is crucial to an artist's livelihood. Conflating a big brother mechanism of proletariat control with art making, Mark contemplates what is accomplished in the space of the studio, or more recently, the-world-as-studio, where artists are charged with manufacturing creativity.

For her part, Mark embraces a conceptual eclecticism to further her wide-ranging and constantly shifting preoccupations. In the process, she generates subtle shifts in our awareness. *Kelly Mark: Stupid Heaven* delivers several unpretentious "ah ha" moments. Curated by Barbara Fischer, the survey presents a cross-section of drawings, sculpture, photography, performances, and video installations that, primarily made within the last ten years, provides a glimpse into the inner sanctum of Mark's private thoughts [University of Toronto's Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and Blackwood Gallery; September 14—October 28, 2007].

Everything is Interesting, 2003, characterizes a central tension in Mark's outlook on life—a tension between a sincere fascination with the world and absurdist skepticism. Produced as a button and postcard, it is displayed in a vitrine alongside other multiples and ephemera from past performances. These include a goofy black-and-white spotted cat costume copied from a stout feline heard meowing on a monitor across the room. In that piece, *Sniff*, 1999, an anonymous hand presents an assortment of objects for the cat to investigate. A bible, shoe, twenty-dollar bill, light bulb, and so on, are held up in succession. When the cat is presented with a plant, however, bored curiosity becomes rapacious. Everything may be interesting, but we all have our predilections.

Mark's objects tend to take on a life of their own, as if they were capable of emotions and empathy. *Hold that Thought*, 2006, a white neon sign, is programmed with all-too-human failure units. Its letters blink intermittently, exhibiting a pathos that mirrors the inherent futility of trying to obey its straightforward request. Like the impossibility of stepping into the proverbial river twice, thought, always changing, can never be still. The sign seems to insinuate a Zen-like appreciation for flux. *Object carried for one year*, 1997, an engraved aluminum bar, humbly asks for a leap of faith in the veracity of its written claim. It is silent, however, about the experiences of that year or even about the identity of its carrier(s). An ultimate expression of the enlivened object, *The Kiss*, 2007, consists of two abutting television monitors, further simplifying Constantin Brancusi's blocky bodies, which, in turn, were a reduction of Auguste Rodin's romantic embrace. Yet, Mark dispenses with figuration altogether. Hers is not a sentimental representation of human sexuality, but an erotically-charged, technological coupling. Their convex surfaces flirtatiously touch, responding to each other in real time by emitting a pulsating glow that suffuses the room.

While Mark's work may appear diffused, from swirling Letraset drawings to photographs of impaled Styrofoam cups and other thoughtfully placed litter, certain themes continually resurface: repetitious tasks, everyday moments that often go unnoticed, and accumulation. *Hiccup #2*, 2003, is a five-channel DVD installation of a performance executed over thirty days. On each monitor, the artist is seen sitting in the same location on public steps between a tourist sign and a trashcan, wearing the same outfit, and executing the same motions like rubbing her face and then taking a sip of coffee. Her actions are fixed while the flow of people and pigeons is unpredictable. It doesn't lessen the impact of this uncanny time warp to realize that, for this sleight of hand, the artist is following an audio script of the choreographed movements delivered on headphones.

Mark mines the physical, mental, and ultimately, spiritual effects latent in understated gestures such as rubbing two painted steel files together until their edges are smooth, drawing script-like lines until her Castell 9000 4B graphite pencil is spent, or recording herself staring into a video camera for thirty-three minutes. Presented on a monitor, *33 Minute Stare*, 1996, is unnerving. Mark's unflinching stare seems bored or accusatory. Or maybe she is just meditating. While we may view these activities as idle, a waste of time that slows down worker productivity, she convincingly demonstrates an enlightened mindfulness and intense focus that are infectious. Through otherwise ordinary devices, Mark aims to subversively tweak perception, inviting us not only to give ourselves freely to mundane existence and ideas simply conveyed, but to take the time necessary for them to work their magic.

—Sandra Q. Firmin