

Island Works



Michael Davey & Delwyn Higgens





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Michael Davey is a sculptor and installation artist who employs photography, drawing and video and whose pieces often include cast materials and found objects. His work has been profoundly influenced by his life as a resident of Toronto Island. He is a recently retired associate professor of York University's School of the Arts, Media, Performance and Design. His work has been collected by individuals and major corporations in Canada, the US and overseas.

Delwyn Higgs is an artist, curator and arts writer whose professional practice includes painting, drawing and sculpture. She has shown in various venues including York Quay Gallery, Harbourfront, Toronto; Gallery 1313, Toronto; Red Head Gallery, Toronto; Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, Toronto and has degrees from the University of Winnipeg (BFA Hons.) and York University (MFA and PhD). She often collaborates with her partner, Michael Davey.



Watercolour

I was first introduced to the magical underworld of the sand filtering system at the Toronto Island Water Treatment Plant as an elementary student. Our fourth grade teacher organized a field trip in which we were allowed to explore this vast industrial area generally hidden from public view. The overall purpose of the trip was to educate us on the workings of the plant and to emphasize the historical importance of the facility as the first water treatment plant in the city having been established around 1850. However, what remained with me was the seemingly unlimited vastness of this underground physical space. What was even more amazing was the fact that the entire area could be accessed by a series of manhole covers dotting the field above the facility.

These memories resurfaced when I was asked to participate in a York Quay Gallery exhibition called POOL held at Harbourfront in 2001. This show, curated by Carla Garnett featured 20 artists who were asked to explore their own personal relationships with water. As a Toronto Island resident, I had a unique perspective on this subject and was given carte blanche in creating an off-site Island based work that would ultimately connect with the other pieces presented in the gallery on the city side.

In early June, I approached the head engineer at the water treatment plant with the idea of repainting the entire field of manhole covers on top of the now obsolete sand filtration area. My goal was to create an artwork that was essentially aerial in nature, that could best be viewed in its entirety from above, ideally by plane or in a helicopter. In order to lend the project credibility, I engaged the help of the staff at Sherwin Williams who agreed to quote on the job and supply both the paint and labour at cost.

Unexpectedly – miraculously, we got the go-ahead a week later from plant management.

I chose twenty stand out colours for the job in collaboration with two Sherwin Williams employees. The paint would eventually be applied by them using a single cardboard template. The rust proof priming and painting process took three days, exemplary given that there were almost 300 manhole covers. Maintenance workers at the water treatment plant really liked the piece but cautioned that the ‘painting’ would appear and then disappear from view according to the season since the grasses that covered the field would be mowed in the spring but would be left to grow to their full height into the fall and winter. This would mean a full colour reveal followed by a gradual obscuring of the work. I regarded this as a positive development as we would then see the many faces of the field.

In July, we booked a helicopter out of Buttonville Airport to view and take photos of the completed work. George Stroumboulopoulos of Much Music fame came along for the ride and videotaped the piece. The video eventually found its way into York Quay Gallery and could be seen on a monitor for the duration of the exhibition. That same summer we received word that the Porter Airlines’ pilots thought the piece was really interesting and that they now pointed it out to passengers just before landing at Billy Bishop airport. They apparently described the work as the largest painting in the world. And they might have been right!





Toronto Island Filtration Plant

The first large intake pipe extending into the lake was laid in 1881. There was an attempt to clean the water by filtering it through sand basins on the Island, but this was not successful. Chlorination began with a pilot project in 1910. Toronto's first water filtration plant was built on the Island and began operation in 1912. Parts of it are still in operation today.



Fig. of Toronto Methods, Series 276, 40276, 40277, 40278









Gibraltar Point Bathing Station

During the years 1999-2003 I completed a series of outdoor installations at Gibraltar Point located on the westernmost tip of Toronto island. The site for these works was a mid-20th century bathing station used by swimmers from nearby Hanlan's Beach. The exposed brick construction of this building and its plain whitewashed exterior allowed for the placement of objects in relief on the many brick projections, 600 in all that are the station's defining design feature. The utilitarian aspect of this civic building provided the perfect backdrop and foil for my collection of found objects.

I have displayed among other things pieces of wood, a collection of balls, photographs of now demolished houses from the area, old Bic lighters, hunks of asphalt as well as stone and brick fragments found in the region. The lakeside location of the building means that it and the surrounding landscape have been subject to extreme wind and wave action over the years. In order to maintain the integrity of the area the city parks department has brought in various sorts of construction materials to bolster the eroding shoreline. This initiative has been a continual process of give and take, the adding of new rock and brick followed by the partial destruction of these materials year after year. Some of my work at Gibraltar Point was dependent on this ongoing activity. As a collector, I chose to show and share various forms of construction debris.

The shores of Toronto Island are 'rich' in found objects, both flotsam and jetsam. Many of these items are man-made and most are plastic. In the act of beach combing my dog Angus and I discovered hundreds of items some of which became core elements in my pieces - plastic detritus as a source of contemplation and public engagement. Unwanted and unwashed, these 'as is' objects became important, even inspiring in the context of the Gibraltar Point bathing station installations. In contrast to many private collectors I decided to display my finds in order to connect with people. This provided an opportunity for viewers as participants to focus on everyday items as aspects of all that surrounds us, to appreciate the beauty of materials whatever their origins and applications and to explore the relationships between seemingly unrelated items. During this process additional ecological considerations became apparent. Can we imagine the huge amount of waste we generate in the process of living, waste that often ends up in our waterways and on our beaches. In knowing better can we do better? These are some of the considerations that arose out of my work at Gibraltar Point.

Chronology of Gibraltar Point Works

Interspecies Collaboration – ball installation, 1999

Re:Place – Island homes installation, 2000

Watercolour – Island Water treatment Plant, 2001

Spent – Bic lighter installation, 2002

Emulsion – paint chip installation, 2003







Spent

If *Interspecies Collaboration* highlighted the spherical gems collected by ball aficionado Angus in all their variety, 'Spent' was the product of a two year span in which I focused on collecting Bic lighters, unloved and known for their banality. Littering the Island beaches, these plastic objects were the remains of a human presence that not only smoked against all medical advice but spent a lot of money doing so. There was some variation in terms of colour but plastic is plastic and once the possibility of creating a flame had disappeared the lighters were discarded and presumably replaced with other Bics.

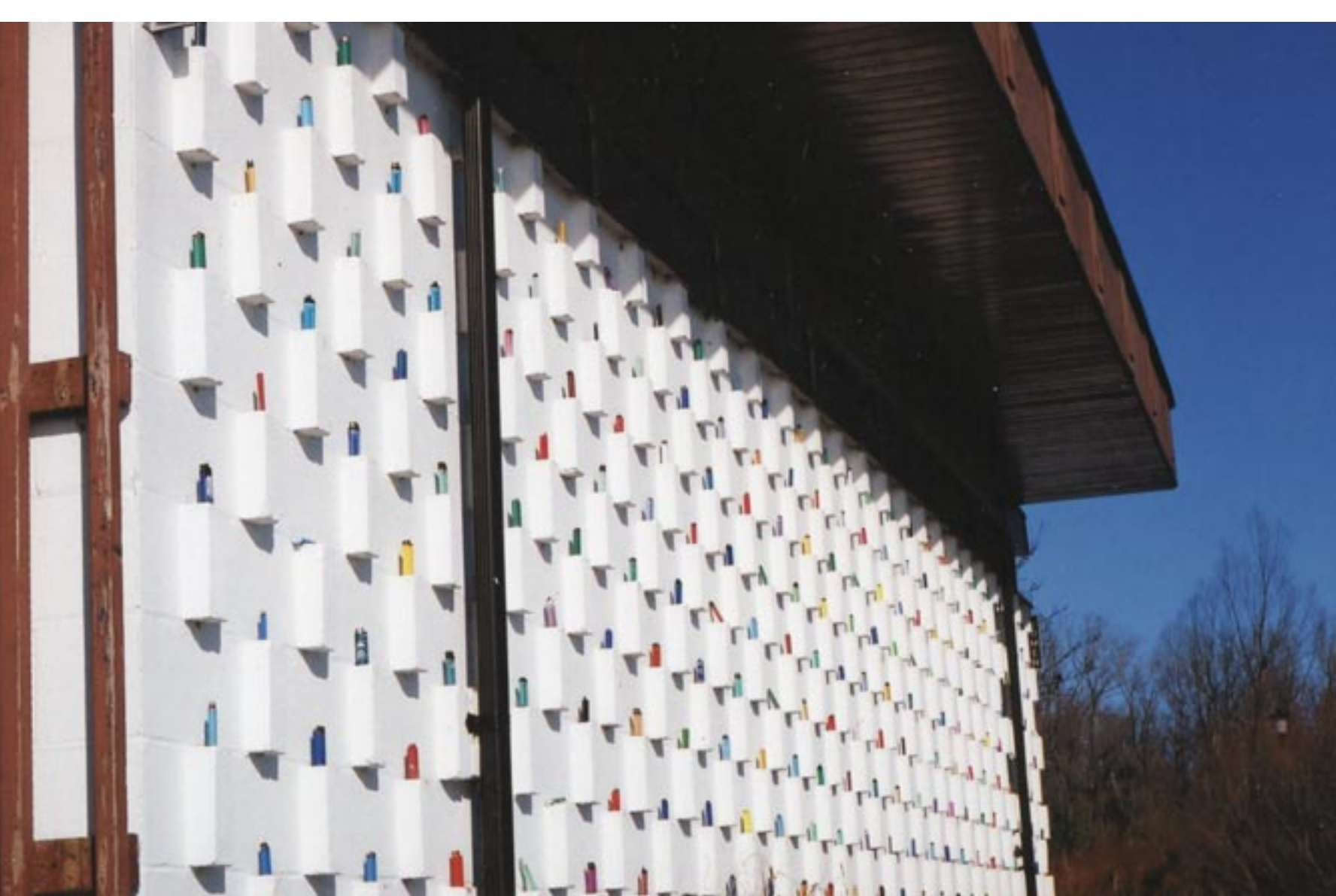
Sometimes components of my bathing station installations would go missing or elicit various responses both positive and negative from viewers, but the Bic collection never did. It remained exactly as I had set it up through three seasons at which point I simply dumped the contents in a plastic bag and headed home. The only notable moments in the exhibition were photographic opportunities when the setting sun over Gibraltar Point briefly illuminated the Bic cases lending an otherworldly glow to them that was vaguely reminiscent of a fiery past.

Jerry Englar's collaged print panoramas document many of Mike's Island works.











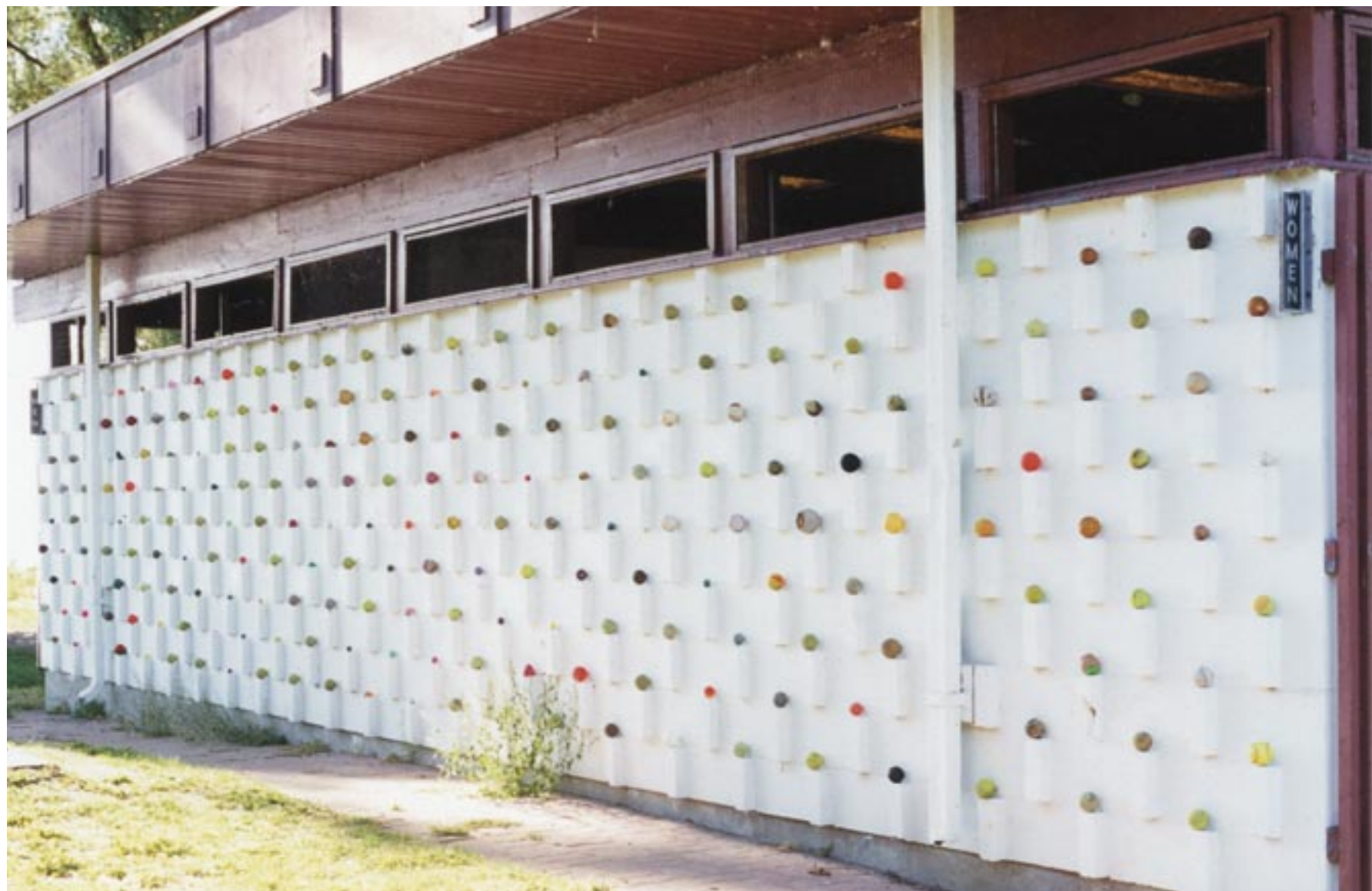
Interspecies Collaboration

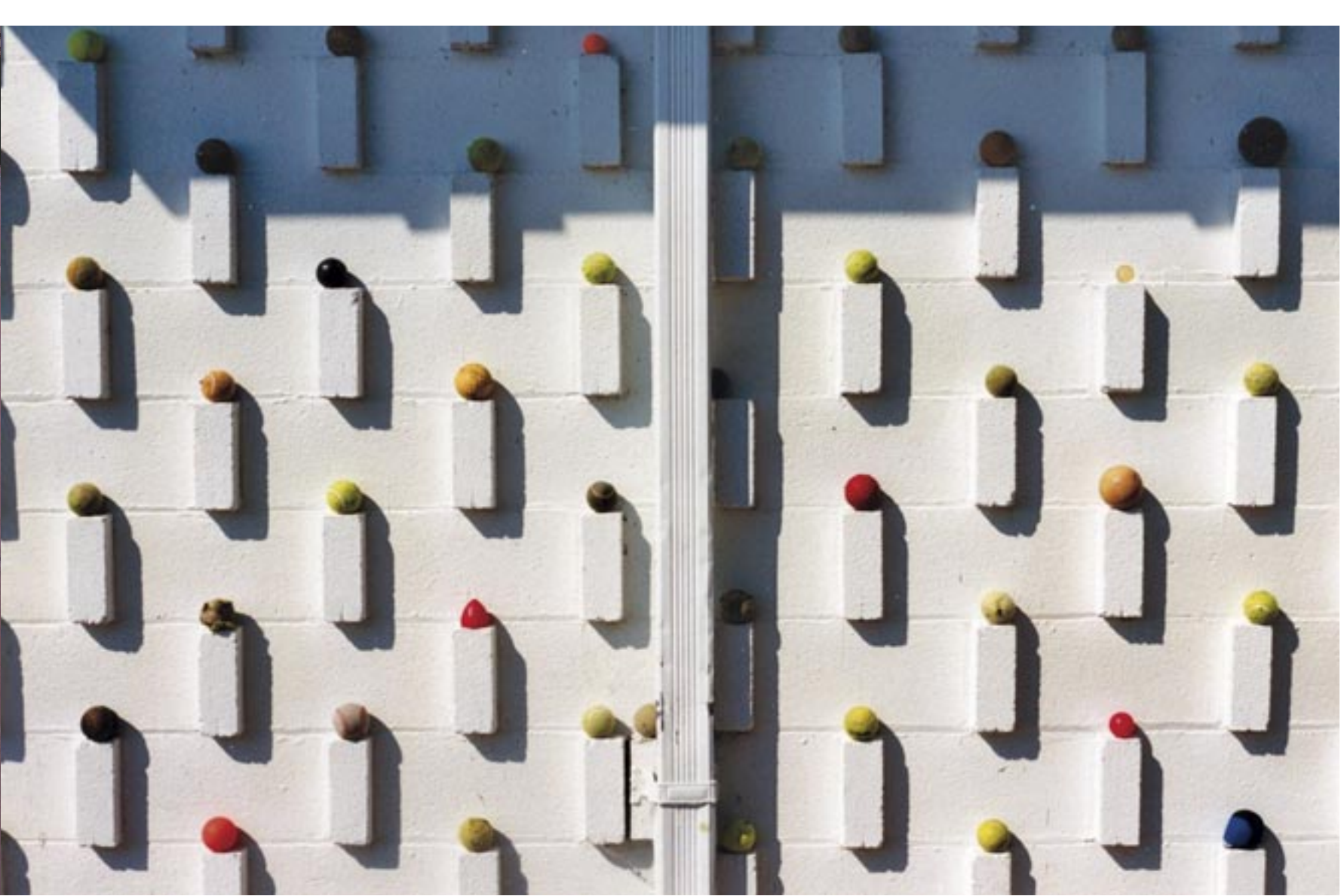
We estimate that our dog Angus, the cairn terrier, collected around 4000 balls during his lifetime. As an inveterate ball retriever and Toronto Island rambler he sniffed out everything from abandoned soccer balls to wayward tennis and golf balls on our daily walks. The deal was that as long as he found these items I was expected to carry them home in my backpack. At one point, my studio was literally bursting with balls. Some of these ended up in a large wall work, a collaboration with Danny O (yes, another ball fanatic) of Boston that now graces the foyer of the Accolade Building at York University.

Others were featured in a video production starring Angus that aired on CBC and yet others were chosen for a site installation at Gibraltar Point bathing station. So, *Interspecies Collaboration* was really a man-dog project that evolved over time and according to opportunities that arose. The ball work at Gibraltar Point was a popular piece especially loved by kids visiting the Island. Angus visited the site often to check out his collection and meet his admirers.



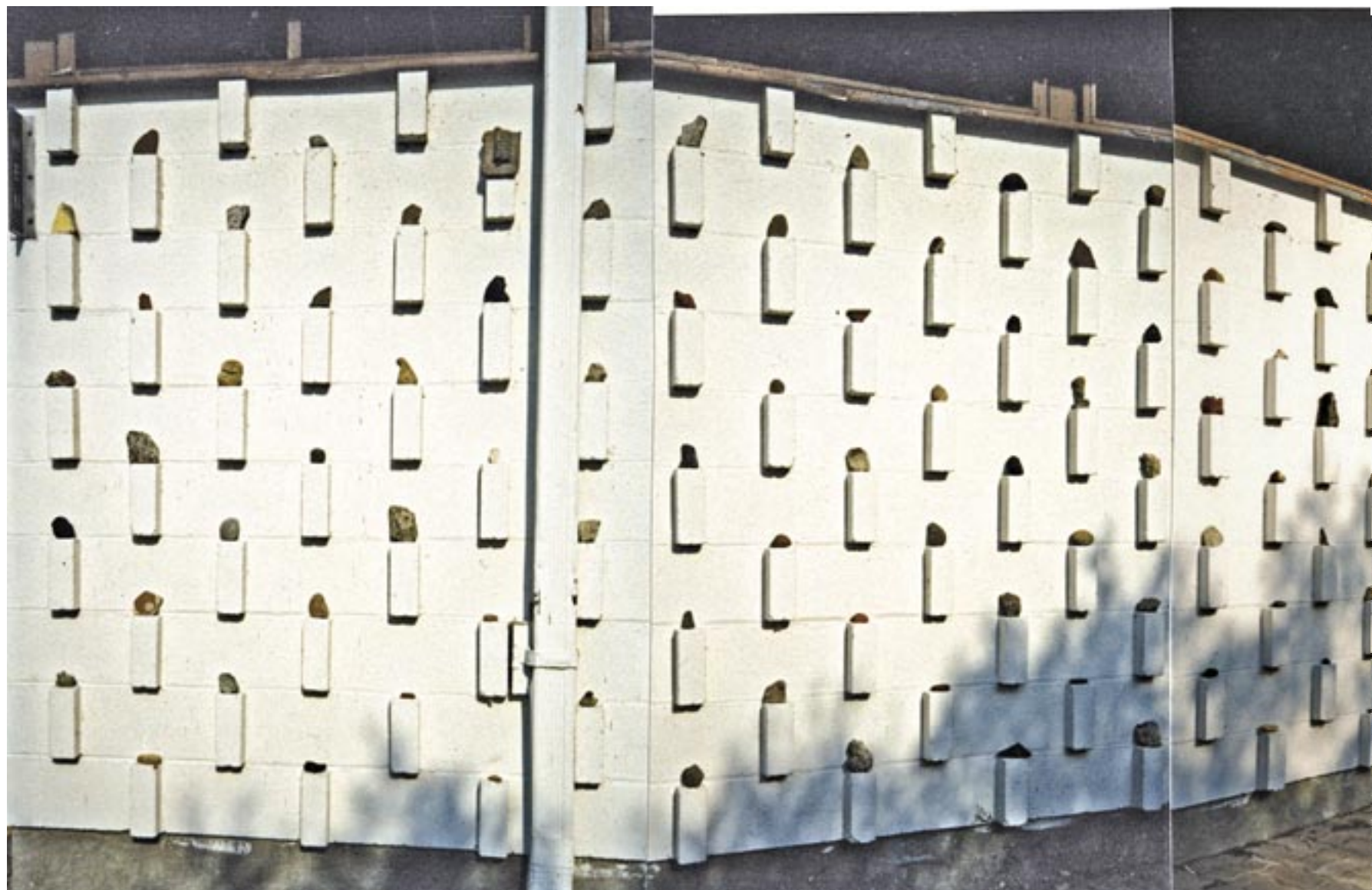
















Re:Place

This installation is an homage to those who once lived in the Centre Island and Hanlan's Point communities on Toronto Island and to their homes which were lost to Metro Toronto wrecking crews beginning in 1956. Details concerning these homes

were documented in photographs and accompanying text by Toronto Island archivist, Albert Fulton. It was by examining Albert's meticulous records that I was able to compile the necessary information to complete this work which was part of CONTACT 2000, a city-wide photography exhibition.



Xeroxed copies of the visual records of homes that were lost were placed on the exposed bricks of the Gibraltar Point bathing station along with small pieces of wood, perhaps construction wood from Island sources. Enlarged xerox copies of black and white vintage photographs of former Island residents skirted the eaves

of the building to complete the project. Visitors were invited to read the descriptive details concerning each home and, in particular, note the scheduled dates for their destruction by Metro Toronto bulldozers.

5

14. Hiawatha Ave.

217 to come

1941

Photo July 1958



85 • 717

2 story - partly wood shingle, partly
frame, dwelling - excellent condition -
fences wire - wood - concrete walk
side - 1 long, large, shed - good con-
dition - groomed garden -



40th day

SATU

670 Lakeshore

326 to come

1957

Photo Feb 20/58

Owner
Resident

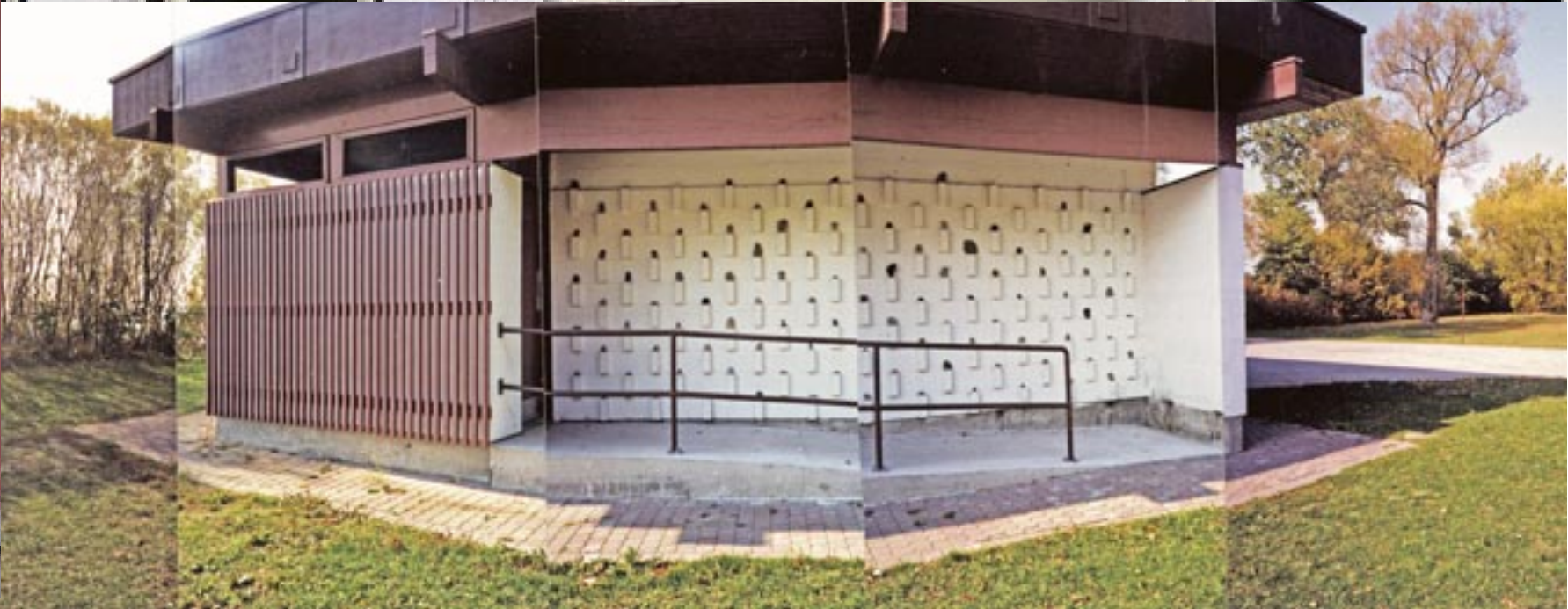
Fair 1 1/2 red cedar
br.
unoccupied Feb 20/58

Worked at rear

Wilfred Rockwood
Rosie Pillsbury
removed Oct 3/58
on 10-year basis.
325 to come









Emulsion

This was my last installation at the Gibraltar Point bathing station and also a personal favourite. As something of a followup piece to 'Watercolour', it exhibits a similar distillation of concerns as an exploration of relationships in colour working within the grid-like format offered by the exterior design of the building.

Again, I worked with Sherwin Williams in selecting paint chips, over 100 this time. These were placed randomly on the brick jut outs so that there was no attempt to adhere to a formula



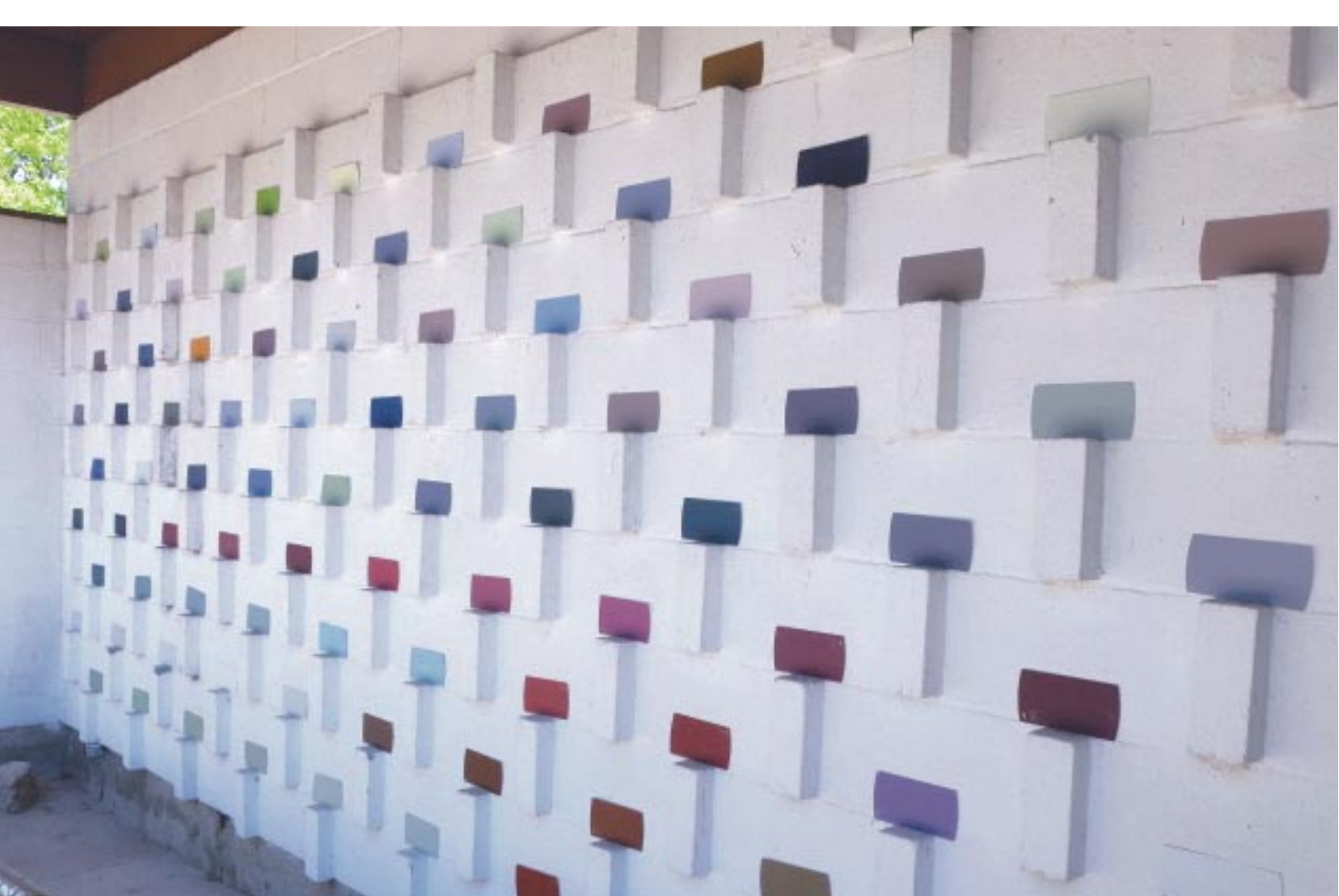
that included consolidating like hues, recognizing differences in tone and other painterly considerations. The result was that the piece looked what I would describe as 'lively' with no means of settling down. Interestingly, this of all the installations I completed was regularly physically altered by viewers who clearly had their own ideas of what complemented what.



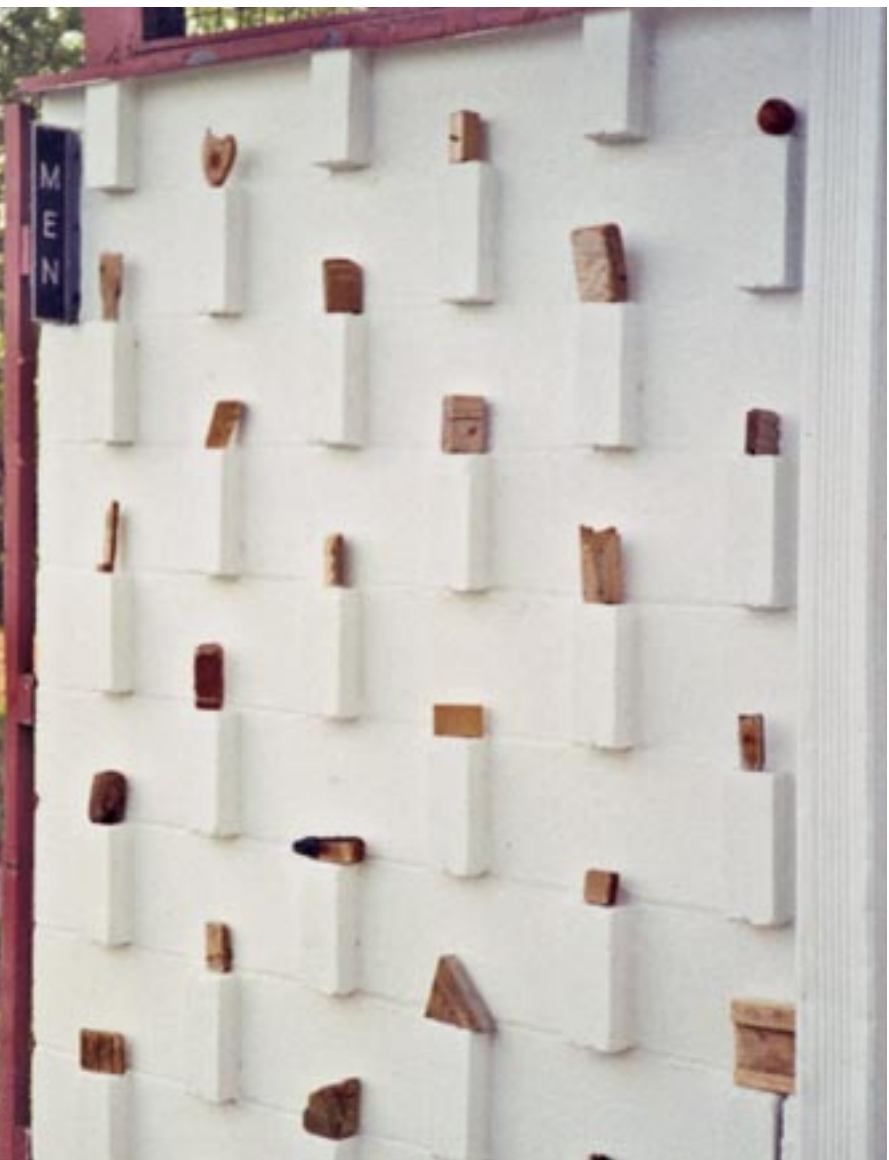














Photographs by Mike, Delwyn, Jerry Englar, David Harris, Rick/Simon. Photo of Mike with Angus & Merlin is by Claudette Abrams. George Stroumboulopoulos made the *Watercolour* video that is in the York archives, see Michael Davey's Fonds list:
<https://atom.library.yorku.ca/downloads/michael-davey-fonds.pdf>

Baye Hunter's Rogue Wave video is on YouTube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vCVSaKayZ38>
<https://www.m9contemporary.ca/>
Special thanks to Warren Hoselton for making it possible.
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