



SPOTLIGHT THIS SERIES OF ESSAYS ON EMERGING CANADIAN ARTISTS
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TAG TEAM

The sculptural conspiracy
of Christian Giroux
and Daniel Young

by BEN PORTIS



Installation view (detail) of *Boole*
at Diaz Contemporary 2008
PHOTO PETER MACCALLUM ALL PHOTOS
COURTESY DIAZ CONTEMPORARY



Christian Giroux and Daniel Young
PHOTO PAUL ST. AMOUR/LAURA ROVINESCU

RIGHT: *Mao* 2008 Powder-coated aluminum, IKEA table and components 78.7 x 78.7 cm
PHOTO PETER MACCALLUM

BELOW: *Umbria* (left) and *Sienna* (right) 2008 Powder-coated aluminum, IKEA table and components 1.47 m x 73.7 cm each
PHOTO PETER MACCALLUM

Within an artistic collaboration there can be something inscrutable and discomfiting. This becomes apparent whenever Christian Giroux and Daniel Young are brought together to tell someone about what they do. Neither fully grasps what they make or how they make it, nor exactly understands it. Their method involves frequent (often daily) exchanges, passing ideas back and forth, adding this, taking out that, holding the line and forming agreement point by point. Their practice, similar to many artists today, is post-studio. The absence of a shared workplace contributes to the sense of vagueness about their creative locus. Giroux lives in Guelph, Ontario. Young lives in Toronto. They communicate mainly by phone and email, composing and refining their sculptures on shared files using design software. While their techniques are digital, the results are nonetheless conventional in terms of materials, manufacture and finished object, and involve typical expenditures of resources, time and effort, as well as foregone ideas and opportunities.

A new work by the duo, *War Game*, provides an inside perspective on the peculiar, nagging tribulation that is collaboration. Drawn by Giroux on his computer, it depicts, in the style of a storyboard, an incident in the 1983 nuclear-suspense film *WarGames*.

In the movie, the episode, which does not feature any of the film's stars, concerns two officers manning a remote, ultra-high-security NORAD missile silo. They receive a command to initiate a weapons launch, and follow protocol—confirmation and entry of codes and the incremental activation of the launch system—until one balks and tries to avert this sure-to-be-apocalyptic course of events. His colleague draws a revolver on him and the scene ends inconclusively. In Giroux and Young's version, the characters are virtually indistinguishable, both resembling, as it happens, Giroux. One wears an open-collared shirt and blazer, the other a hoodie. Each sits at his station, staring at his computer screen, and only registers the presence of the other when the chain of communication breaks down. One looks at one's counterpart and sees...oneself? Despite its being created by one set of hands, Giroux and Young claim mutual authorship of *War Game*. This allegory of their practice acknowledges its blind spots and its address to ideology and critique.

Giroux and Young have been working together since 2000, when they were young and younger. (They are now respectively 37 and 27 years old.) Giroux studied painting and sculpture, completing his BFA at the University of Victoria in 1993 and his MFA at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1995. Victoria made the stronger impression on him: he is deeply influenced by the painter Robert Youds—for his skeptical adherence to modernism and efforts to disassociate it from the status quo—and the sculptor Mowry Baden—for his devotion to the ideal of a socially determined utopianism. When Giroux abandoned his painting ambitions, he brought in Young as a production assistant for his sculptures and quickly realized that he had, in fact, found an accomplice.

Young was involved with an underground nexus of art, urbanism and activism in Toronto; the scene encompassed such entities as Art System, Anarchist Free University, Reclaim the Streets, Toronto Public Space Committee, Mammalian Diving Reflex and Instant Coffee, and individuals such as the artists James Carl and Luis Jacob, the architects Adrian Blackwell, Christie Pearson and Kenneth Hayes, the writers Naomi Klein and Darren O'Donnell and the activist organizer Dave Meslin. Young arrived in the city just as this scene was maturing into a viable civic force, one that was ripe for academic study. Between 2001 and 2005, he completed a self-directed, interdisciplinary program on the subject "Space, Aesthetics and Practice: The City and the Politics of Everyday Life" at the University of Toronto. He brought a precociously intellectual element to his collaboration with Giroux. Young was less than reverent of the modern art legacy, preferring critical theories derived from architecture or geography. Conversely, after the artists began working together, Young gained more respect





for Giroux's heroes, polymath artists such as Tony Smith, Donald Judd, Dan Graham, Gordon Matta-Clark and Robert Smithson.

Herein lies the problem of ideology and criticism. Many artists of Giroux's and Young's generations (and earlier ones, to be sure) have worshipped at the altars of the radical sculpture that emerged in the 1960s. In addition, there is a (prevalently male) tendency to recapitulate those achievements that can verge on fetishism. The hallmarks of 1960s Minimal and Post-Minimal art include unit structure, serial form, industrial supply and fabrication, composite materials and objects that are paradoxically both rational and anthropomorphic. The critique implicit in this work: modern society demanded that art be no more than a commodity, yet the governing assumption was that a commodity is incompatible with the exalted qualities ascribed to art. Some 40 years later, is it possible that there are more nuanced, more entrenched, more insidious economies and ecologies of the art object? Giroux and Young appear to work according to the following premises: our culture's technological frontiers have moved beyond our faltering, elapsed capitalist paradigm; the mechanisms of consumption have shifted

from industry to craft; and, with commodities rapidly becoming obsolete, potentially they are closer than ever to works of art.

The first sculpture to result from the collaboration was *Fullerene* (2003), a wondrously useless sphere composed of arced aluminum struts surfaced with strips of bicycle tire. Three-pronged brackets fasten the struts together into a pattern of geodesic pentagons and hexagons, hence the reference to Buckminster Fuller. Fullerene is also the name of a carbon molecule, C_{60} , that was discovered in 1985 and whose structure is comparable to, though more complex than, the sculpture's. The molecule is being researched for potential applications, though none exist so far other than its aesthetic appeal to scientific minds. Giroux and Young's *Fullerene* appears to be a vehicle. It can be occupied or propelled, though not at the same time and with limited satisfaction in either case.

In 2004, Giroux and Young finished two more large-scale works of infernal ineffectuality. Both *Access*, a knotted, closed circuit of steel ductwork, and *Excel*, a three-dimensional cube made of fluorescent light fixtures, insinuate function and purpose. I first saw *Excel* while it was being assembled in an old barn. Shafts of

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If Giroux and Young's latest exhibition involved playful disruptions of cubic objects, their earlier work showed an ongoing affection for space-age spherical forms.



TOP TO BOTTOM:
IDCSP 2006 Aluminum, PVC,
vacuum-formed plastic and
components 4.06 x 2.43 m
PHOTO TONI HAFKENSCHIED

Fullerene 2003 Aluminum struts and
polyurethane bicycle tire 2.43 m
diameter PHOTO GALEN KJELLMER

Alouette 2006 Aluminum, PVC and
components 81.3 cm diameter
PHOTO TONI HAFKENSCHIED

sunlight seeping through the spaces between the barn boards starkly accentuated the emptiness around it. In contrast, *Excel's* self-generating glow, inward and dissipating, provoked bemusement. Tenuously and absurdly self-referential, *Access* and *Excel* still demonstrate considerable material integrity, ingenuity, refinement and wit. *Access* and *Excel* are, of course, two of Microsoft's most durable and successful software systems, shaping organizations great and small around the globe according to Microsoft's office concept, inverting the bodily implications of *incorporation* as they make people more businesslike.

Giroux and Young's next group of works, which appeared in 2006, comprised a trio of aluminum sculptures based on American, Soviet and Canadian spy satellites from the Cold War era, titled for the capsules they copy, exactly, in shape and size: *IDCSP*, *Cosmos* and *Alouette*. All date from the 1960s, when satellites performed various clandestine reconnaissance and communications roles. Once decommissioned, a satellite is not often scrapped, but simply remains in orbit, a perpetual artifact more notable for its cosmetic attributes than its outmoded instrumentation. Giroux and Young's previous sculptures allude to forms lacking definitive orientation: they all suggest a lack of reliance on the floor, even release from it. Satellites are expressly designed to float in space. However, brought down to earth, as artworks for example, they become profoundly terrestrial, looking totemic, as does *IDCSP*, or resting ambiguously on the floor, as do the pod-like *Cosmos* and *Alouette*. Here, Giroux and Young take the emphasis on the shell (touched upon in their earlier works) further, focusing their efforts on replicating the satellites' hulls, finding appropriate manufacturers for each section of each sculpture. The results are beautiful, blank and neutral—domesticated, like a commodity; contemplative, like art.

Giroux and Young push the concept of anonymous fabrication even further in their latest sculptures, collectively called *Boole*, for the 19th-century logician whose algebra is the basis of computer science and, specifically, computer modelling. Each work in the series is a hybrid consisting of one or more hollow, coloured aluminum forms resting upon or engulfing an IKEA table. Many of the tables have had a piece cut out and removed to reveal the material minimalism that corresponds to IKEA's low prices. The metal forms suggest incisions, additions and subtractions. Giroux and Young again address the question of how a sculpture sits, going back to the proto-minimal works of Constantin Brancusi, whose geometric carvings could be art, a base to put it on or furniture simultaneously. The metal boxes were made in Scarborough by Triple Metal Products, a specialist firm that provides custom sheet-metal fabrication for the high-tech industry.

Despite months of discussion and design on their computers and consultation with Triple Metal as they prepared their files for production, Giroux and Young only beheld the end results a few days prior to their splendid June 2008 exhibition at Diaz Contemporary in Toronto, a just-in-time output direct from factory to gallery. Their most coherent, intricate and convincing works to date, they also contain elements of contention to ponder and debate, fuel for the next set of problems and propositions that will eventually insist on form. ■