

**Tom  
Bendtsen**  
**Argument #3**  
**Ground**  
**Onward #2**



Installations

**Karen  
Kazmer**  
**Interstitial**  
**Space: Respire**

**Open Space**  
April 5 to 27, 2002

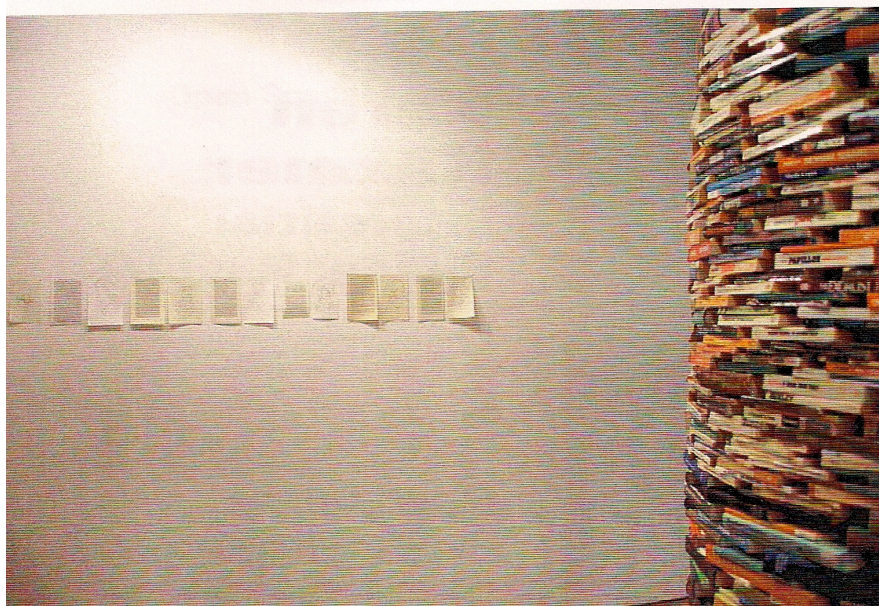


**&** Perhaps the most sculpturally striking character on the keyboard, the ampersand suggests at once unity and duality. It is a word per se, yet it is a collapsing together of the letters e and t, a ligature derived from the Latin *et* (and) as in "*et nunc et semper*" (and now and ever). This show links or collapses the work of two installation artists, Tom Bendtsen & Karen Kazmer, who differ in outlook and technique, yet share a preoccupation with the duality in apparent unities. Both Bendtsen and Kazmer explore in-between states and spaces, make works that challenge the viewer's assumptions about and experience of what it means to be here, now.

Bendtsen's three pieces—*Ground*, *Onward #2*, *Argument #3*—suggest the heroic. The rider of *Ground* is the artist as white male conqueror, master of the passions, grounded physically and metaphysically, breaking new ground. The grainy image reminds the viewer of foundational moments in the history of motion pictures and the synergy between cinema's pioneers and the mythology of the pioneer. Also a self-portrait, although not necessarily recognizable as such, the bust in *Onward #2* recalls the confident, centred subjectivity of the humanist masters. The title suggests that such works, sumptuous and replete, are an integral part of progress, of what Milan Kundera calls "The Grand March of History." The column in *Argument #3* recalls the great classical columns—columns that supported and continue to support the great edifices of power: temples, courts and banks. That this column is made out of books only adds to its majesty. It is a figure made flesh: knowledge, so often spoken of in architectural terms, here literally holds up the gallery space.

Yet, on closer inspection, these works appear haunted by fragility, the spectre of imminent collapse. The horseman in *Ground* goes nowhere, returns eternally. The triumphal narrative turns out to be no narrative at all—rider and horse are prisoners of a dystopian moment. The video apparatus reveals its own process; the image blurs, disintegrates before our eyes. Made with a Super 8 subsequently copied to

Below: *Argument #3* (detail), Tom Bendtsen, 2002 Right, Top: *Ground*, Tom Bendtsen, 2002; Right, Bottom: *Onward #2*, Tom Bendtsen, 2001

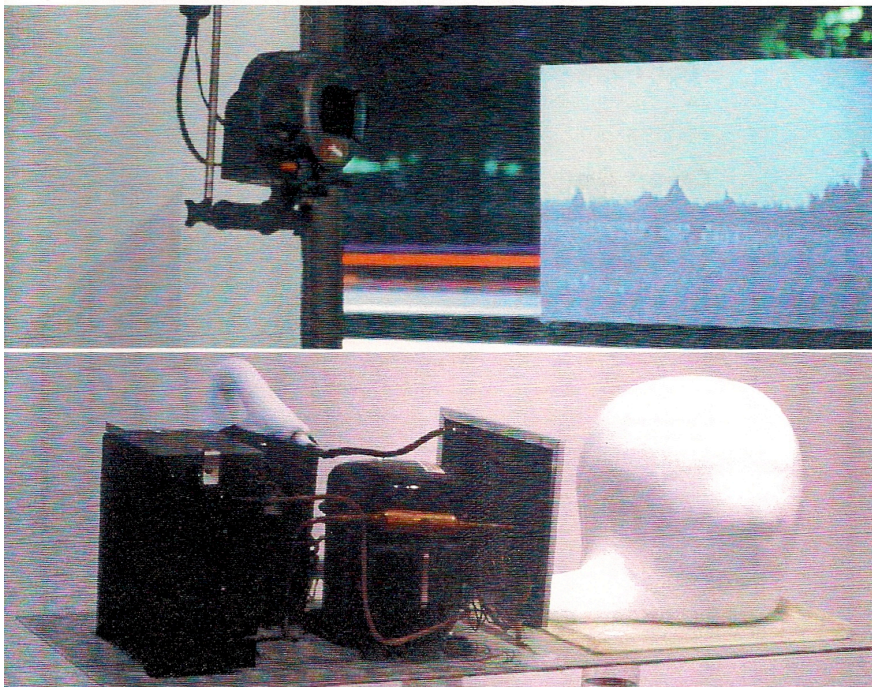




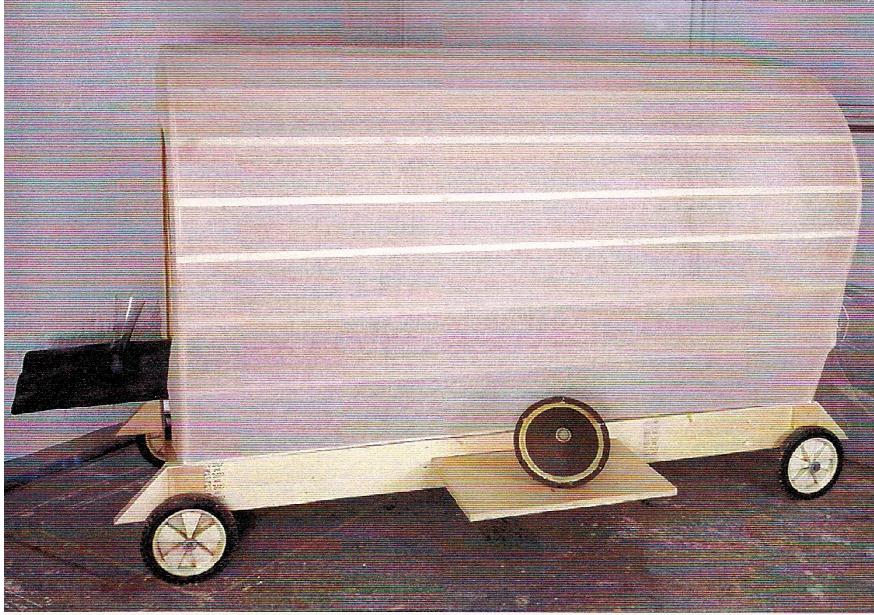
SVHS then to a digital camera, then filmed again with a VHS camera, the film is itself a copy of a copy of a copy. Placed at the gallery's entrance, this work seems to beckon us with the promise of riches inside, but Bendtsen subtly frustrates, and in so doing satirizes, our and his craving for the new, the narcissism of endless novelty. Meanwhile, the bust in *Onward #2* grows ugly, melts, becomes disfigured, collects the detritus of the gallery space. The title's irony is revealed: there is no Grand March here, only decay and death. The bust's placement beside the refrigerator suggests not so much balance as grim equivalence—the artist as obsolete, rattling appliance, Bendtsen once again mocking his and others' sense of self-importance. Like *Ground*, *Onward #2* is sonic as well as visual. The discomfiting hum of the refrigerator reminds us of the mortal lives of machines. Finally, the column in *Argument #3* teeters precariously, barely able to support itself. Given the slightest impact, it will topple to the ground, spreading books all over the floor. We approach cautiously, but not out of awe in the presence of the sacred. This work conveys not knowledge's strength but its weakness, vulnerability.

As the title indicates, *Argument #3* is one of a series of such installations. Over the past three years, Bendtsen has produced several such "Arguments." These works have stimulated much dialogue and established Bendtsen as a key emerging artist in Canada. But the works remain elusive. The title "Argument" is itself provocative. Are the works themselves arguments? Between whom? What over? Or is the title grimly ironic, pointing to the futility of such arguments? Bendtsen's process in constructing this column of knowledge appears to give a clue to its meaning, for the artist collected *local* books, from bookstores, thrift shops, and universities. This work, in other words, seems to ground us in the here and now. Yet much remains ambiguous. The titles of the books involved give little or no indication of their provenance, suggesting rather only a bland universality.

Bendtsen's three works, then, so apparently solid, centred and robust, convey







Above, Right & Far Right: *Interstitial Space: Respire*  
(installation views), Karen Kazmer, 2002

a kind of gothic nervousness, suggesting the collapse not simply of the things, machines and spaces around us, but of our very notions of self, knowledge, and progress.

Like Bendtsen's, Kazmer's work deals with collapse, collision, collusion. Unlike Bendtsen's works, which place themselves in and against art history and in particular the classical tradition, Kazmer's work does not appear to engage with the genres of the past. Yet in many ways, *Interstitial Space: Respire* partakes of the baroque, a mode which involves *high* drama—the world as theatre—and what Sean Cubitt calls the “explosion of nature into culture.” In all her work, Kazmer explores the intersubjectivity of the inert, how objects in a room interact. In this piece, a drama unfolds between wagon and fence, human and machine, order and chaos, a drama that forces our eyes upwards, takes us into the gallery's vertical spaces. Nature—as energy, as body—occupies and impels technology, exploding into the mechanical.

Unlike Bendtsen's self-portraits, Kazmer's work does not seem explicitly autobiographical. Yet the covered wagon, known in the US as a “Conestoga Wagon” and in Canada as a “Prairie Schooner,” has great personal significance. A native of Chicago—itself a town on the edge of the frontier—Kazmer arrived in Vancouver in 1973, appropriately enough in an AMC Maverick stuffed with belongings, only intending to stay one month. She has stayed for almost three decades, becoming a seminal figure in the local art scene. Although an expatriate, Kazmer has produced work rooted in the local and in the concrete particularity of the spaces she has shown (among others: *Open Space*, 1989; *Artropolis*, 1993; Richmond Art Gallery, 2001). Her show *Occurrences* at the Burnaby Art Gallery (1993), for example, incorporated the building's history—it had been among other things a Benedictine monastery and the home of a cult called the More Abundant Life





Foundation. Such works not only root themselves in the local but also expand the frontiers of installation art.

In *Interstitial Space: Respire*, incongruous elements come together, take on new meanings. Her wagon is at once an icon of the Old West, suggesting narratives of deprivation and conquest, and a living breathing organism in the present—an automaton struggling against its own enclosure. Kazmer points out that such wagons were also referred to as “Camels of the Prairie” in the 19th century. This piece literalizes the metaphor, suggesting the mechanical in the human, the human in the mechanical. Chain link fence is normally thought of as a sign and vehicle of obstruction, as something employed to create boundaries between inside and outside, private and public, here and there. But Kazmer uses it to invite the viewer farther into the gallery space. As the piece’s title suggests, Kazmer is obsessed with what she calls “interstitial spaces.” The word interstitial derives from the Latin *interstitium*—a “thing standing between.” In medicine, an interstice is a “space or gap in a tissue or structure of an organ.” This work invites the viewer to explore the gallery’s interstitial spaces—those ignored or disregarded, hidden and removed from direct experience, its posts, crevices and ceilings. Mirrors, attached to the posts and beams, take us further into these hitherto neglected regions. Such exploration makes us not only reconsider and reconfigure our relationship to the built environment, but also reminds us of our own interstitial spaces—between our conscious and unconscious selves and between the very structures of our body.

Ultimately, Bendtsen’s and Kazmer’s works ground us in the present, make us feel the space around us differently. And yet, both bodies of work force us to acknowledge, however uncomfortably, the reality of what may or may not happen next.

*Kegan Doyle, March 2002*