

JENNIFER AND KEVIN MCCOY

DAVID FRANKEL

Sitting on an awards panel this summer, I was shown the work of a husband-and-wife artist team, Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, and liked it quite a lot. It had things you might want from art: intelligence, novelty, wit. I wonder, now, how those qualities will weather under the stress of a different time. That may be an unfair pressure to apply to work made at a more benign moment, but for me it is inescapable in talking about the McCoy's: A couple of their pieces were to some extent inspired by the World Trade Center, so I

Delphic slogan. The pink light flickers, and the elevator sinks back whence it came.

The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council ran a studio program, World Views, high in One World Trade Center. The McCoy's were residents there in 1999, riding the elevators with the brokers and clerks, the borrowers and lenders, the people who worked in the offices all around them. The experience

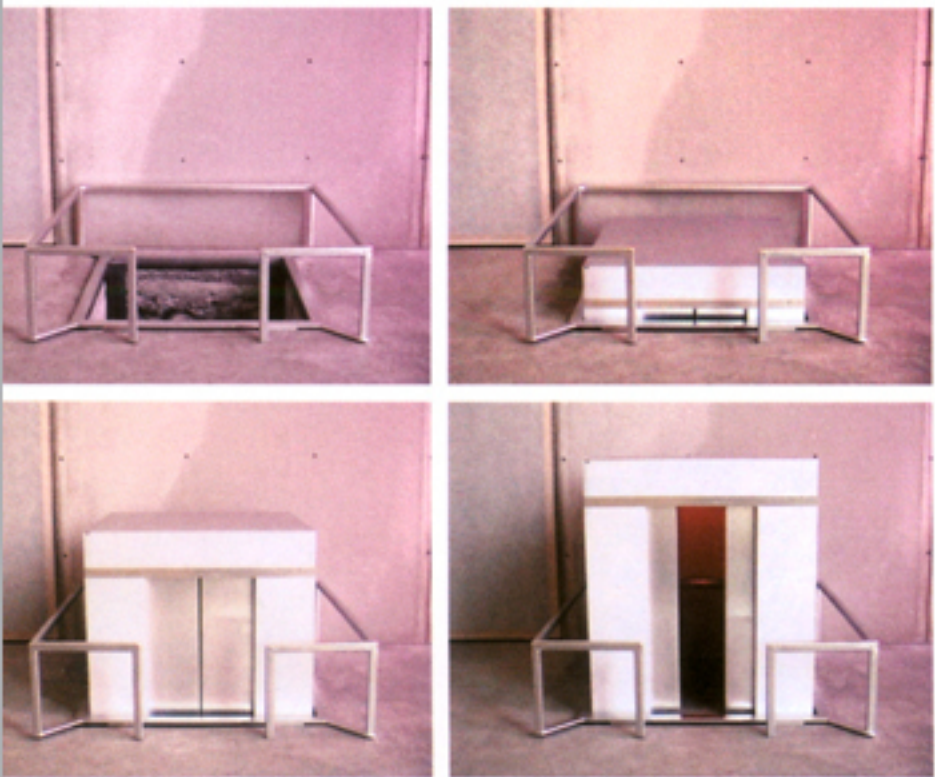
links that it virtually has none at all—exploring it, you feel the randomness of the slender thread you are following. Turning the language of corporations and public relations into an art medium, the McCoy's map chaos, making sense—but not too much of it—out of this synaptic geography.

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produced a computer-based artwork, *Airworld*, 2000, and then, later, *Pink Light*.

Airworld surveys the world of business as it appears on the Internet. Compiling a database of Web pages where cameras watch places of work—offices, grocery stores, poodle parlors—the McCoy's hacked those sites to extract and rear the live image stream on a Web page of their own. Some of the cameras must be for security, perhaps others were installed by people who just want us to see what they are doing, turning our voyeurism to the ends of their self-advertisement. On the *Airworld* site (www.airworld.net), voyeurism is inverted again by a cryptic overlay of text showing the Internet traffic route between the computer we are using and

Airworld's odyssey through the loci and languages of global capital apparently produced an opposite reaction, because *Pink Light*, says Jennifer, arose out of the question, "If you're going to find a space of enlightenment in your business environment, where would that be?" There are elevators in every kind of building, but the McCoy's see theirs as "a mini-business space," surely because, as Kevin says, "We had just finished riding those ninety floors at the World Trade Center." They made this space an oracle; the texts that the voice recites come from novelist Philip K. Dick's *Valis*, which Kevin describes as a "prophetic techno-paranoid book about a guy who goes insane by having a pink light beamed at his forehead containing



Above: Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, *Pink Light*, 2000, mixed media. Installation views, Postmasters, New York.
Right: Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, *Airworld*, 2000, screen capture.

can't write about them without thinking about it.

In fact, it was one of these pieces, *Pink Light*, 2000, that first drew me in. It is an aluminum elevator cage twenty-four inches high. At rest, the elevator is invisible, its top being flush with the floor. But at the press of a call button the car rises, taking possession of its full wee height. The doors slide open, a pink light glows from inside, and a disembodied voice recites a

the computer sending out the image—it's telling us we are traceable. Another part of the site borrows texts that companies have posted online but replaces the company name with the name "Airworld." So *Airworld*, as Jennifer says, "becomes this anonymous corporate thing, one day rubber boots, one day the Romanian Democratic Party." The Internet is not exactly trackless; rather, it has so many pathways and



In this ongoing series, writers are invited to introduce the work of artists at the beginning of their careers.

all this information about history, God, the creation of the world. It made us think about the computer and all the cathode rays you're bombarded with." The elevator states, among other things, "The phenomenal world does not exist. It is a hypostasis of information processed by the mind." Or, "The mind is not talking to us but by means of us . . . its sorrow diffuses irrationally. As Plato discerned, there is a streak of the irrational in the World's Soul." Or, "One mind there is, but under it two principles contend." It is weird to be told these things by an elevator. And by a diminutive one at that, too small to enter, and vanishing after use almost without trace. Over time, a comic quality in *Pink Light* may recede in favor of its uncanniness.

Right now, *Pink Light* looks like a one-off. More typical of where the McCoy's seemed to be going this summer is *Every Shot, Every Episode*, 2001, a taxonomy of the '70s LA crime show *Starsky and Hutch*. Three monitors hang over a long shelf of CDs you can play on them. The CD cases are labeled: EVERY ZOOM IN; EVERY YELLOW HOUSEHAGEN; EVERY PLUG; EVERY TILT DOWN; EVERY SIXY OUTFIT; EVERY PLANK. Some of these categories are methodological (EVERY TRACK OUT), some visual (EVERY SUIT), some character or plot based (EVERY WIFE AND ON-FRIEND; EVERY MAMA OF PAUL). In every case, though, the CD sequences *Starsky and Hutch* clips showing a tracking shot, a blue, a moan, and so on, each quickly followed by another clip showing another version of the same thing. The heart of the piece lies in its conversion of plot or story into list or database. "After the novel, and subsequently cinema, privileged narrative as the key form of cultural expression of the modern age," writes new-media theorist Lev Manovich, "the computer age introduces its correlate—the database. Many new media objects do not tell stories; they do not have a beginning or end. . . . Instead, they are collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other." To experience *Every Shot* is to brush up against a subterranean social and technological process going on all around us; if stories are central to our sense of self, perhaps it is also to watch a modern consciousness take on a different shape.

When I talked to the McCoy's in the first week of September they were working on a piece called *Every Anvil*, which was to put old Looney Tunes cartoons through the same kind of shredder that *Every Shot* did *Starsky and Hutch*, with the difference that instead of including everything it would focus on violence. The database categories—BREAKING THINGS; POISSON; SHAKING; ALMIGHT; FANC; EYE GENIUSES; THUG; TORNAO SPIC



Top: Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, *Every Shot, Every Episode*, 2001, mixed-media installation view, A.R. Gallery, New York.
Bottom: Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, *Every Shot, Every Episode*, 2001, stills from color videos.

WAITING COOR; MOAN; SCREAM; THREAT; YELL—provided a catalogue of paranoia that by horrible chance has turned out weirdly in tune with the moment. Does this historical accident now seem so gratuitous that *Every Anvil* becomes unworkable? Or will viewers find

meanings in a piece like this that they wouldn't have found before—will the art stand up to the time? Artists everywhere must be asking themselves such questions, and it will be a while before answers emerge. □
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