

Espace Sculpture

Bart Habermiller

État... de grâce à Calgary

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A State of Grace in Calgary

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Number 35, Spring 1996

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9929ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

O'Rourke, D. (1996). Bart Habermiller : état... de grâce à Calgary / Bart Habermiller: A State of Grace in Calgary. *Espace Sculpture*, (35), 25–29.

Bart Habermiller



État... A State *de Grâce* *of Grace* à Calgary in Calgary

Calgary est une ville où le nouveau a presque entièrement supplanté l'ancien. Les quelques vestiges architecturaux qui subsistent s'apparentent davantage à une *Dodge City* qu'à la vieille Angleterre ou à la France. C'est dans d'interminables couloirs de miroirs, créés par les tours à bureaux du centre-ville, que se mirent les maisons qui ont survécu au grand renouveau urbain de années soixante-dix et quatre-vingt : un paysage urbain à la Jetsons et à la Superman. Mais cet air de jeunesse est toutefois entaché. La plus ancienne route qui traverse la ville, le Macleod Trail, est un cauchemar esthétique peuplé de motels, de stations-service et de concessionnaires automobiles. On y dénombre également les quelques industries lourdes de Calgary ainsi que des cimetières d'autos.

C'est là que le sculpteur Bart Habermiller exerce son métier depuis 1985, dans un dépôt sur le site de la Calgary Demolition Company, instaurée par Frank Landry en 1952. Il y a dix ans, Habermiller était un étudiant impécunieux qui chauffait son garage-studio avec les projets rejetés de l'école d'art. La veuve de Frank Landry, Grace Colton, ayant eu vent que l'artiste devait... brûler de l'art pour se garder au chaud, lui proposa de s'alimenter gratuitement en bois de chauffage à même la décharge. En échange de l'aide qu'il lui apportait pour nettoyer le terrain, il récupérait des rebuts qu'il intégrait à ses créations. Il l'appuya même dans sa lutte contre les spéculateurs fonciers et les bureaucrates de la ville qui voulaient faire condamner sa propriété.

En 1986, la décharge fut placée sous la gérance d'Habermiller et il inaugura une nouvelle décennie d'activités qui n'était pas sans rappeler l'époque où la compagnie de Frank Landry était florissante. L'artiste y vécut durant plusieurs années en s'installant dans un vieux silo à grain. En hommage à ses propriétaires, il nomma son nouveau lieu de résidence *Graceland* et réalisa plusieurs projets qui honorent Frank et Grace par leur prénom (comme *Frank Wild Years*, une sculpture

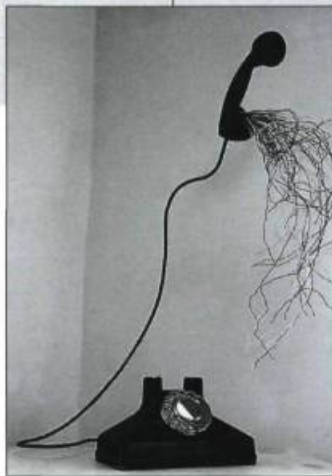
Debbie O'Rourke

Calgary is a city where the new has nearly devoured the old. The rare pieces of venerable architecture that remain have the feel of Dodge City rather than Olde England or France, and since the vast urban renewal of the seventies and eighties only a few of the sandstone treasures remain: reflected in the endless hall of mirrors formed by the downtown office towers. It's the cityscape of the Jetsons, of Superman. For a few weeks during the early eighties, the red-caped Man of Steel actually swooped among the glass leviathans that had grown like crystals in the city centre: Calgary played a supporting role as Metropolis in the movies.

But there are patches on the complexion of the city where the youthful facade breaks down. Macleod Trail, the oldest prime route leading South-east from the city centre, is an aesthetic nightmare of motels, gas stations and car lots. In this corner of the city, built on the Eastern edge of a prairie that extends for two thousand miles, Calgary's few heavy industries consort with the automobile graveyard. Here is where the bones of the old town have been scattered in uneasy rest. Here the sculptor Bart Habermiller has plied his art for a decade: one foot in Calgary's depression-haunted past and one foot in the eternally brighter technomythological future.

February 1996 is the tenth anniversary of Habermiller's association with a junkyard that has drawn a collection of Calgary's discarded wealth since Frank Landry started the Calgary Demolition Company in 1952. A decade ago Habermiller was an impecunious sculpture student, feeding the wood-stove of his garage studio with discarded art school projects. Mr. Landry's widow Grace Colton, having implied from a newspaper article that he had to burn art to keep warm, offered him free firewood from the junkyard that Frank's death had left under her management.

Fascinated by the place, Habermiller began to periodically visit Mrs. Colton, gathering a few pieces of trash to use in his art projects in ex-



Bart Habermiller;
Blahlahlah: unlisted,
1988. Courtesy
of the artist.

représentant des montagnes russes réalisée avec des matériaux des années cinquante). Assumant aussi bien les rôles de conservateur, d'imprésario et de sculpteur, Habermiller partage l'abondance du site avec des confrères artistes. La première prestation publique de *Graceland*, une performance intitulée *Night of the Living Junk-Monkeys*, eut lieu par une nuit enneigée d'avril 1986. Des artistes et d'autres participants réalisèrent un théâtre circulaire en brûlant de l'herbe, créant ainsi un cercle noir sur la neige blanche. La scène était éclairée par des feux de bois dans de vieux barils d'huile. Cent soixante-quinze personnes se présentèrent et plusieurs restèrent jusqu'à l'aube. À chaque dimanche, on tenait à *Graceland* un salon d'artistes de style "western". On y créait des liens en favorisant la discussion et le jeu. Malgré tout le sérieux de l'entreprise, le jeu reste une composante importante pour Habermiller : «J'ai toujours défendu ce que nous faisions, dit-il. Fondamentalement je décrirais cela comme un forum différent pour l'art et la communication.» Cette notion de communication a souvent constitué le propos central de ses œuvres sculpturales. Le son, également, fait partie de nombre de ses structures. *Frank's Wild Years*, par exemple, faisait résonner une cacophonie de musique, de

change for working long hours to assist her in cleaning up the land. As a result Habermiller was available to help when Mrs. Colton, caught between the city bureaucracy's threats to condemn the property and the machinations of unscrupulous land speculators, was in danger of losing the family's legacy: eight acres of land piled high with old building materials, furniture, fixtures and household items, casualties of Calgary's boom years when the old was cleared to make way for the shiny new.

The yard was placed under Habermiller's management in 1986. He cleaned and maintained it, helped Grace Colton to battle City Hall, and ushered in a new era of activity that was strangely evocative of the time when Frank's demolition company was at its peak. For several years Habermiller lived in the junkyard, occupying an old grain bin that had been converted into a home with the addition of a kitchen, a porch, and a wood stove. Like Frank, Habermiller generated ideas and schemes that drew to him people who formed working communities around various projects. The personnel who had formed around Frank Landry sought temporary employment with his company, and housing in the trailers that dotted the yard. Habermiller's guests were artists in need of materials and space.

In honour of his landlady, Habermiller dubbed his new home "Graceland". He has often commemorated the gift exchange that formed the base of his creative life in projects (i.e. *Frank's Wild Years*, a sculptural roller-coaster of material excess from the fifties) that honoured Frank and Grace by name. He shares the abundance of Graceland with fellow artists by taking on the roles of curator and impresario as well as sculptor. Graceland's public premiere was a performance art festival called *Night of the Living Junk-Monkeys* held on a snowy night in April 1986. The artists and volunteers had created a theatre in the round, burning the grass down to make a circle of black in the snow. It was lit by wood burning in old oil barrels. The artists were free to use fire, make loud noises, build tall structures, even employ guns and explosives. 175 people turned up and many stayed until dawn: women in fur coats downing beer from bottles while warming themselves beside flaming "hobos' barrels".

That was only the beginning. Every Sunday during this period, Graceland was the setting for a western-style artists' salon: a "burn" in which fire and beer facilitated discussion, networking and play. Play was always very high on the agenda, but Habermiller was serious about what he and his invitees were accomplishing. "I never used the word junk or garbage. I always upheld what it was we were doing. I basically described it as a different forum for art and communication."

Communication itself has often been the subject of Habermiller's sculptural works, and sound has been integral to many of his structures. *Frank's Wild Years* blared a cacaphony of music, commercials and news from six built-in radios. At the second Graceland Art Rodeo *90 Wants*, a set of speakers mounted like chrome flowers on slender metal stems, delivered a commercial pep-talk on changing your life and your shampoo; on gaining power, respect and bargains. In his series of telephone-based constructions collectively titled *Blahblahblah*, the speakers disgorge wild sculptural monologues of wire and jagged plastic.

In 1988 and 1989, Habermiller was offered a full merit scholarship to attend the Chicago Art Institute. He left Graceland in the care of a group of Calgary artists while he took his masters degree but he returned during each summer of his Chicago tenure, bringing a cadre of artists to join the Calgary personnel in the Graceland Art Rodeos. After

Bart Habermiller,
Firestone Falls, 1993,
Triangle Gallery,
Calgary. Photo: Marc
Hutchinson.





Bart Habermiller,
Graceland, 1990.
Photo: Colin Norheim.

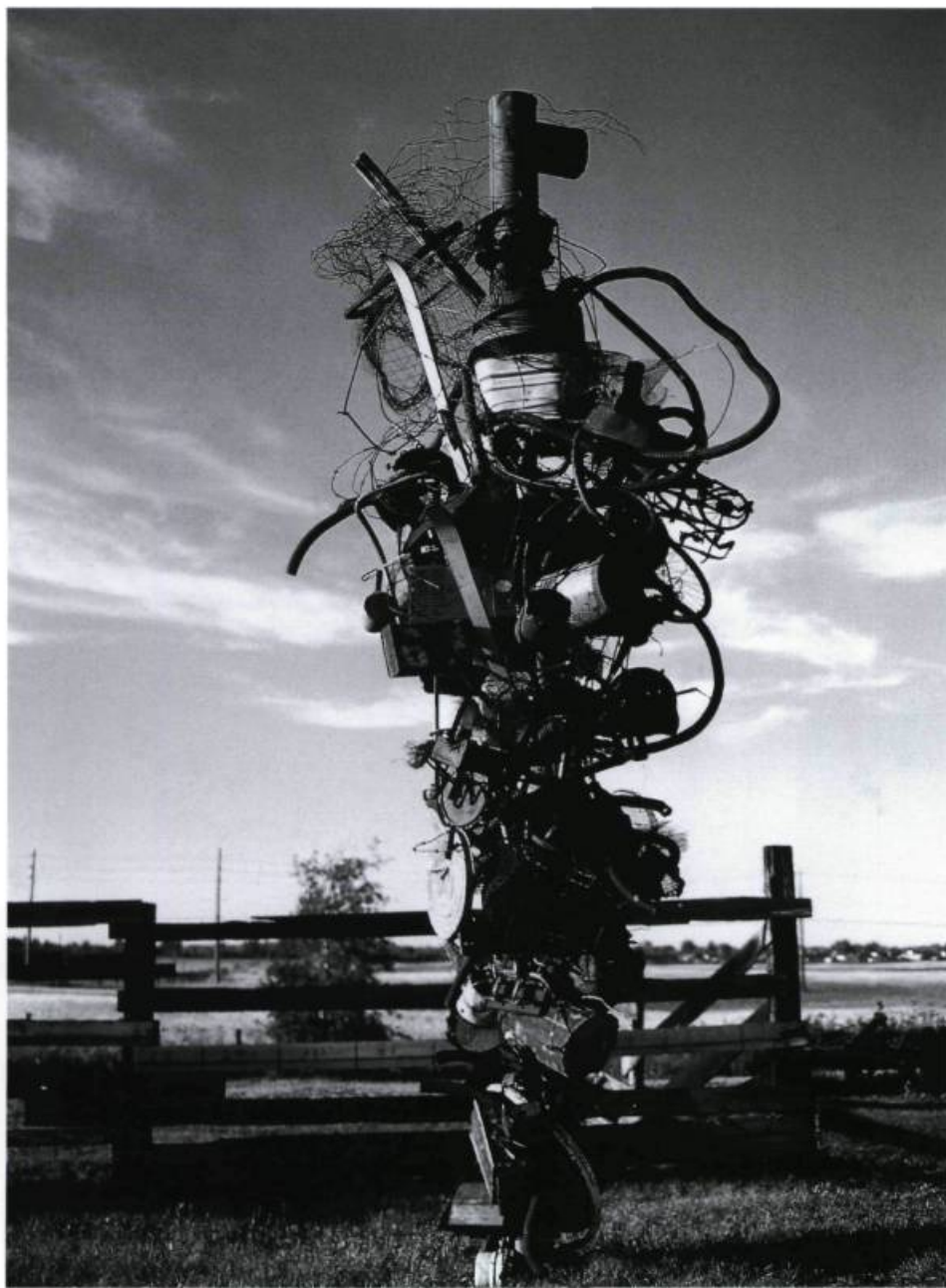
la profusion des matériaux disponibles, trouvant là une "sagesse" qui correspond bien à la situation écologique actuelle. «Frank et Grace, précise-t-il, viennent d'une époque où la récupération n'était pas un choix environnemental mais une nécessité d'ordre économique. Pour eux, tout objet pouvait avoir une seconde ou une troisième vie.»

L'attitude d'Habermiller face aux déchets de la civilisation ne concerne nullement la valeur marchande, mais s'exprime par des propositions sculpturales. Une de ses réalisations, *Firestone Falls*, montrait une installation *in situ* réalisée à partir de tubes en caoutchouc récupérés, de pneus et de vieilles bottes qui se déversaient de la mezzanine vers le plancher de la Triangle Gallery. Il voulait signifier par là qu'une accumulation de pneus usés ne constituait pas nécessairement une agression sur le plan visuel ou environnemental. Lorsqu'on envisage le vieux caoutchouc noir comme un objet potentiellement beau, il cesse de poser un problème pour l'environnement. Ainsi, en pénétrant dans la galerie, on y découvrait, sous le mode de la parodie, toute l'élégance et la mouvance d'une chute d'eau naturelle avec, en plus, une forte odeur de caoutchouc et de décomposition. Le caoutchouc avait été calculé avec précision pour donner au public une idée de la quantité de caoutchouc qui est rejeté tous les mois dans la campagne. La présentation de *Firestone Falls* coïncidait avec les désastres survenus dans des cimetières de pneus en Ontario. En outre, elle anticipait la pratique des artisans-entrepreneurs qui commencèrent à fabriquer des objets en recyclant des pneus. Une approche qui incite à respecter davantage la qualité de notre environnement et la quantité de nos soi-disant déchets. Pour les jardiniers qui ont recours au compostage, les déchets de cuisine ne sont pas une source de contamination olfactive

tire-dump disasters in Ontario, and it anticipated the practise of craftspeople who have begun to create environmentally-aware designer lines of accessories from recycled tires. This structure encourages us to reach a level of full consciousness with respect to the quality as well as the quantity of our so-called waste. To gardeners who compost, kitchen waste has become not a source of smelly contamination but an offering to the soil. Our garbage dumps are also sources of gases that, unused, leach out to contaminate the atmosphere but if mined could help, along with other sources, to eliminate our dependency on nuclear power.

Thus it is not Habermiller's intention to contribute to our sense of ourselves as a poisonous, rampaging species. Like an overweight person at a midnight refrigerator, humanity consumes, then tries to flush its guilty excreta out of sight, out of mind, out of its awareness into the great "out there". Grace and Frank's mania for saving grew out of wartime and the Great Depression, when "out there" disappeared. Out of necessity lawns became potato fields, metal was scrupulously re-used and an old lightbulb had to be turned in for recycling before a new one could be purchased. Generations born since images of the full earth were broadcast to television screens from space also carry an awareness that there is no "away" (notwithstanding the political dinosaurs' insistence that a hole in the ozone cannot be dealt with before the deficit!). Now that we know there is no "out there", it is time to realize that, as Habermiller implies, perhaps there is no garbage.

Critics have referred to Habermiller as an archeologist of the recent past. Recently, he has begun to manufacture "artifacts", attaching small objects and memorabilia to plaques of reclaimed wood. The size of a chocolate bar or a bag of chips, they fit into vending machines that made their debut appearance in Calgary's major public gallery, the Glenbow. In 1994 he was invited by Annette Hurtig, curator of Contemporary Art, to create a new work for an exhibition titled "The End of Modernity". The artwork, *Arcade*, challenged the gallery's parameters in many ways: from the curation to the security departments, it is against every museum caretaker's



Bart Habermiller,
Recyclone (at Graceland, 1990). Photo:
Colin Norheim.

pauses publicitaires et de nouvelles émanant de six radios. Lors du deuxième *Graceland Art Rodeo 90 Wants*, des haut-parleurs fixés sur de minces tiges de métal ressemblaient à des fleurs de chrome. Ils livraient un message sur les bienfaits de changer sa vie et son shampoing; sur les façons d'acquérir pouvoir, respect et de profiter des bonnes occasions.

En 1988-89, Habermiller poursuit des études au Chicago Art Institute. Il confie alors *Graceland* à un groupe d'artistes de Calgary et revient chaque été pour participer aux différents *Graceland Art Rodeo*. Abondamment couvert par les médias locaux et nationaux, le premier rodéo a attiré près de mille personnes pour une journée multimédia où la nourriture, la bière et le soleil stimulaient fortement l'expérience sculpturale. À l'opposé des minuscules centres d'artistes autogérés qui fonctionnent avec des règles très précises, *Graceland* constitue un immense "carré de sable" où l'on peut s'exprimer en toute liberté.

Une fois ses études terminées, et malgré les occasions alléchantes qui s'offraient aux États-Unis, Habermiller revient à Calgary. Il y exploite *Graceland* autant pour son aspect historique que pour

several weeks of gathering, building, fighting, drinking and working together, the artists flung open the doors of Graceland and invited the public in for a spectacular "closing". The first Art Rodeo engendered a huge response from the media, nationally as well as locally, and drew close to one thousand people for a one-day multimedia event in which food, beer, music and sunshine mediated the sculptural experience. "It was a real spectacle. The liberating experience was that there were no gallery walls to contend with: no administration, bureaucracy, practicality... We just said, 'Here, you can spread out and do whatever you want.' Pretty spectacular pieces came out of that."

Graceland was a huge sandbox to play in, compared to the tiny red-tape-haunted havens created by artist-run centres. Even the opportunities available to a precocious and articulate young artist in the major centres of New York and Chicago paled beside the possibilities Habermiller saw in eight acres of history-laden, junk-choked prairie. Habermiller returned to Calgary with his master's degree in spite of opportunities in the U.S. that would have been irresistible to most striving artists. "For me part of the education (at the Art Institute) was finding out what it's like to be these high-profile artists. I found I could admire an artist's artwork and accomplishment, but after talking with them for fifteen minutes and finding out how they spent their time, I wouldn't like to wake up in the morning and be that person... Being in Chicago and starting to get a sense of what it would be like to be in a big centre like Toronto or New York, I realized that the way one has to operate in order to call oneself an artist in that environment seemed to be more and more like work: it would take me away from what I truly like doing..."

David Clark, professor of Media Art at the University of Western Ontario, was a contemporary of Habermiller's in Chicago: "Bart is always able to find a community and work within his surroundings to make things happen. He quickly found the economy in Chicago. But I think he felt restricted in not having the countryside to work in... He hated the fact that he had to make artwork that would fit through doors."

So Habermiller returned to Calgary where he mined Graceland for its sense of history as well as for its wealth of art materials, finding wisdom that applies to our modern ecological situation. "Frank saw things differently than most people. He felt everything had a use, and he never overlooked anything... Frank and Grace grew out of a time when to use everything wasn't an environmental choice, but

a necessity. I mean, everything had a second or third life to it... out of necessity they had to save."

Habermiller's attitude towards the detritus of civilization is curiously value-free, resulting in sculptural statements that wriggle clear of simplistic ideologies. One of his most elegant achievements, *Firestone Falls*, was a site-specific installation constructed from old rubber tubing, tires, even rubber boots that poured from the mezzanine to the ground floor of Calgary's Triangle Gallery. "One of the things I was saying with *Firestone Falls* was to look at tires as not being an environmental eyesore: If we start considering old black rubber to be a thing of beauty, it ceases to be an environmental problem. When you walked into that place, it did have a movement and an elegance like a natural waterfall. It's a parody of natural beauty. But it also gave out a strong sense of rubber and decay..." Habermiller is not advocating complacency with respect to our offal: the rubber in *Firestone Falls* was measured and the quantity posted so that it could communicate to the public a sense of the volume of rubber waste that was spewed onto the countryside monthly.

The construction of *Firestone Falls* was coincident with the

mais une offrande à la terre. Les décharges publiques émettent des gaz qui, lorsqu'ils ne sont pas utilisés, s'échappent et polluent l'atmosphère. Exploités et combinés à d'autres sources, ils peuvent nous libérer de notre dépendance face à l'énergie nucléaire.

Le souci d'économie de Grace et de Frank était issu de la période de la guerre et de la grande dépression. On transformait les pelouses en champs de pommes de terre; le métal était systématiquement réutilisé et les vieilles ampoules devaient être envoyées au recyclage avant d'en acheter une nouvelle. Les générations qui sont nées, depuis que des images de la planète entière sont retransmises sur les écrans de télé, sont désormais conscientes qu'il n'y a pas de "là-bas" (et ce, malgré l'insistance de certains politiciens qui nous font croire qu'on ne peut pas s'intéresser au trou de la couche d'ozone avant de s'occuper du déficit!). Aujourd'hui, nous savons qu'il n'existe pas d'ailleurs, et il est grand temps de réaliser, comme le signale Habermiller, que la notion même de déchets s'en trouve transformée.

Les critiques parlent d'Habermiller comme d'un archéologue d'un passé récent. Dernièrement, il a commencé à produire des "artefacts" en fixant des petits objets et des *memorabilia* sur des plaques de bois récupéré. De la dimension d'une barre de chocolat ou d'un sac de croustilles, ils sont insérés dans des machines distributrices. Les premiers ont été présentés en 1994, au Musée Glenbow, à Calgary. Habermiller avait été invité par Annette Hurtig, conservatrice de l'art contemporain, à concevoir une œuvre pour l'exposition *The End of Modernity*. Intitulée *Arcade*, l'œuvre remet en question plusieurs approches muséales, allant du travail de conservation à celui de la sécurité.

La position anti-élitiste d'Habermiller n'est pas seulement de nature idéologique : elle s'inscrit dans sa pratique quotidienne et prolonge la pensée de pionniers comme Joseph Beuys. Libéré des multiples lourdeurs administratives imposées aux artistes, il s'intéresse davantage au processus, au plaisir de faire, il interagit, intervient pour trouver des solutions aux problèmes. Cette attitude lui a permis de s'impliquer à la fois comme artiste et comme membre actif de sa communauté. Il réussit à préserver sa liberté tout en s'abandonnant au "principe de plaisir", ce qui est rarissime de nos jours. Après avoir été démontée et transportée à Graceland, permettant ainsi à ses éléments constitutifs d'avoir une nouvelle vie, *Firestone Falls* sera présentée en 1996, lors d'une exposition organisée par la conservatrice Joan Stebbin de la Southern Alberta Art Gallery, à Lethbridge.

Mais Habermiller ne limite pas ses interventions aux galeries, ni au havre privilégié que représente Graceland. Par le biais de "Recyclone", une entreprise de design qu'il dirige avec Kathy Ott, il présente ses sculptures dans des restaurants, des salles de billard et des résidences privées. *Recyclone*, qui est aussi le titre d'une de ses œuvres, est un jeu de mot sur le fait que des objets et des matériaux recyclés soient utilisés dans la construction et le design. «Un cyclone, dit-il, ça bouleverse tout.» Et Habermiller est un artiste qui navigue aisément au milieu des vents changeants et des bouleversements. Quant à ce qu'il adviendra de Graceland, il reste philosophe, sachant bien que ce n'est qu'une question de temps avant que les propriétaires ne reçoivent une offre irrésistible et ne cèdent l'entreprise. Tout en souhaitant qu'une section de l'ancien dépôt puisse être réservée aux artistes, Habermiller et d'autres qui y ont œuvré croient fermement que Graceland est avant tout un concept et qu'il pourra exister n'importe où. ■

Traduction (abrégée)

training to allow the public to operate, handle and even carry away pieces of an exhibition. Habermiller's way of coping with this dilemma was not to demand carte blanche due to his status as an artist, but to involve all of the museum staff in assisting him in solving the problems the piece created for them: "I said, 'My work's about collaboration. It's not just me making an artwork and saying, 'You guys deal with it.' I want to build this thing from the ground up with you guys.' We went through the whole list: vending machine in the lobby, selling, money, exchange, security... all their beefs and problems that would have been talked behind peoples' backs and rumoured, got it all out in the open. I just put it out there and they came back with what I needed to hear... After that there were no hitches. They solved a lot of problems for me and volunteered a lot of information and support..."

Habermiller's anti-elitist stance is not merely an ideology he expresses, but an essential part of his everyday practise. Such a life-style is truly contemporary, in harmony with the spirit of much-revered pioneers like Joseph Beuys. Though inventive in their materials and approaches, and vocal in the century-long revolt against the Academy that is the war-cry of modernism, most artists still embrace the struggle for status. This re-invention of the Academy by those who most vocally oppose it, is challenged by Habermiller's practise of gift exchange with aging junkyard owners, security guards, and fellow artists.

Habermiller is truly process-oriented: immersed in the joy of making, problem-solving and interaction, he has largely freed himself of the oppressive regime of endless documentation and administration that has become the contemporary artist's lot. It has enabled him to exist as an artist and community member while retaining a level of personal freedom and devotion to the pleasure principle that is seldom practiced in contemporary life. It appalls a writer about art to know that only one snapshot was taken of a major work like *Firestone Falls* before it was decomposed into its constituent parts and hauled back to Graceland. Yet Habermiller was truly content to see it carted away and the components re-used another day. It will have another life during 1996, in an exhibition of site-specific work curated by Joan Stebbins of the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge.

Habermiller doesn't restrict his venues to galleries, nor to the shelter for free spirits that is Graceland. Through "Recyclone", a design business he runs with partner Kathy Ott, Habermiller infiltrates his high-concept sculpture into restaurants, pool halls and homes. *Recyclone* is also the name of a sculpture that Habermiller constructed for one of the Art Rodeos. It's a catchy little word, an obvious play on the fact that recycled objects and materials are employed in construction and design.

But Habermiller's comment about the name reveals an agenda that functions beneath his populism, his commitment to communication and flair for promotion: "A cyclone changes everything." Habermiller is an artist who sails comfortably through shifting winds. He is philosophical about his own status, and about the future of Graceland. It's only a matter of time before the family gets an offer for the land that they can't refuse, and Graceland's current incarnation will end. While he hopes that a small portion of the former junkyard can be retained for the use of artists, Habermiller and others who have worked in its atmosphere of freedom and generosity feel that "Graceland is an idea. It could exist anywhere." ■

NOTE

1. *Catalogue*, the 2nd Annual Graceland Art Rodeo.