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Her work has been published in places like the Globe and Mail (where she was resident poetry critic for a few years), the Toronto Star, the National Post, The LA Review of Books, the FADER, Hazlitt, the Hairpin, Real Life, the Walrus, Toronto Life, Canadian Art, Raptors HQ, Joyland, The Puritan, Maisonneuve, C Magazine, Said the Gramophone and more. She also plays guitar in a punk band called Rotten Column.

CHRIS FOSTER received an interdisciplinary BFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art (NSCAD) in 2008. His artwork has been exhibited internationally, including the Harbourfront Centre; the Art Gallery of Ontario; Eastern Edge Gallery (St. John's, Nfld), the Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery (Halifax, NS), the Khyber Centre for the Arts (Halifax, NS); Eyelevel Gallery (Halifax, NS), Gallery Connexion (Fredericton, NB), the Odd Gallery (Dawson City, YK), and as part of cultural events including Nuit Blanche Toronto; Halifax Nocturne; and WRECK CITY (Calgary, AB). He is based in Toronto.

STRUCTURES FOR
THE EXPANDED PLANE

BY EMMA HEALEY

Chris Foster tells me about his favourite billboard. On a recent vacation, he and his partner, the artist Layne Hinton, were driving from Mexico City to Oaxaca, staring out at the countryside. Suddenly, they saw an enormous sign rising up out of the landscape. The text was worn away, so all that was left was a single image: an enormous, almost cartoonish picture of a bull. As he's describing it to me, Foster flips through his notebook to show me the sketch he made. It's a striking image: the bull's face, singular and stark, held up by a sprawling grid of scaffolding. The whole thing simultaneously interrupting the landscape and seeming to rise out of it.

We're in his studio, talking about the work that you are here today to see. We're trying to discuss it in a straight line, but we keep falling down paths of free association. *My friend, Chris says, has a beam of light that, for just one week out of every year, passes through a window on the second floor of his house and cuts across the entire building, moves down the stairs and lands right at his front door.* We talk about the camera lucida and the camera obscura, the stippled light that comes through tree leaves during an eclipse, and that scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* where Indiana Jones plants the staff in the path of a beam of sunlight at exactly the right place at exactly the right time, perfectly illuminating the miniature city before him, revealing the secrets that lie within.

I was thinking about the experience of being in your childhood bedroom as a car drives by, Chris says, as he adjusts a projection of a mesh grid's silhouette on the wall beside us. He's talking about the moment at night when the headlights of a passing car can turn your ceiling into a shadow play. *The panning optics of that experience... there's something really magical about it.* Just as nature can generate its own stunning, spontaneous concerts of texture, form and balance, the city often makes art of itself. All you have to do is pay attention.

The forms and themes in *Structures for the Expanded Plane*—light, shadow, rhythm, the nature of the city—are the culmination of a set of ideas Foster's been working with for years.

His light sculptures and shadow cities have been shown inside a number of temporary sites: a disused industrial kitchen, Honest Ed's just before its demolition, a cafe across the street from the Gladstone that was turned into a gallery for six months before it was torn down for condos. Last year, he installed a twelve-foot replica of a weather silo at Ontario Place, a playful tribute to the architecture of a site at the heart of this city and on the edge of it whose future is increasingly uncertain. This fall, he organized a funeral for the lofts at the Coffin Factory, which housed a diversity of artists for decades until the building was sold to a developer, its long-time tenants evicted.

These types of sites are becoming unsettlingly common as Toronto suffocates under gentrification—little blazes of art flaring up in idiosyncratic spaces just before they're bulldozed and turned into more glass towers. Foster's art fits in deceptively well—its soothing rhythms hiding a sly, serious message. I think of his *March of Development* every time I pass a new Notice of Development in my neighbourhood, staked in front of a beloved community site—the tiny city throwing its enormous, shifting shadow self across the walls of a doomed building.

Foster's medium is the city, in more ways than one. I have frequently heard him describe himself as a “garbage wizard”; much of his work (and his home) is made from found materials he picks up off the curb while tooling around town on his bike. (The lamp in this exhibit, which he built himself, is made from a found and repurposed spotlight housing.)

Garbage wizardry, I think, entails a preternatural understanding of an inherent truth about living in a large, densely populated urban area: that the border between your private, interior existence and the communal life of the city outside your door is often so thin that it's basically fictional. Your neighbours' conversations come through the walls; your stuff becomes their stuff and vice versa. I frequently borrow a phrase I once heard Chris use while he was talking about an old apartment. The place was on Bathurst, and whenever he'd put something he didn't need any more out on the

curb, he'd say he was “throwing it in the river.” All you had to do was walk away for a few minutes, and when you came back, whatever you'd left would be gone, carried away by the flow.

The artist Jenny Odell, who once spent a residency meticulously cataloguing thrown-out objects at the San Francisco dump, writes in her book *How to do Nothing* of the potential for community (and resistance) this interconnectiveness can unlock. “When we recognize the ecological nature not only of biotic communities but of culture, selfhood and even thought—that indeed, consciousness itself arises from the intersection between what's “inside” and “outside” (troubling the distinction thereof)—it's not just the boundary between self and other that falls away.” This is where the wizardry comes in: through engaging with the realities of the civic ecosystem—physical proximity, concrete materials, communal experiences in public space—we may be able to access a deeper truth, one that creates a little space for magic.

Back to the expanded plane. In this exhibit, you can see Foster's aesthetic fascination with the concrete material of physical advertising: how much metal it actually takes to hold up an individual billboard, the incidental gorgeousness of that thoroughly practical structure. Digital advertising works this way, too, of course, but more abstractly—for every single image or idea you see, there is an enormous structural network keeping it upright. The difference is in the material: the scaffolding of digital advertising is intangible, algorithmic, the opposite of concrete.

Think of the time—not long, but somehow forever ago—when billboards were considered one of the most insidious forms of advertising in our daily lives. I can remember arguments on drive-time CBC Radio about all the billboards on the Gardiner, how they distracted drivers and marred the aesthetics of the landscape. These concerns feel comparatively quaint now that most forms of contemporary advertising seem to live inside your body and your brain: targeted digital ads, tethered to your desires, trailing you psychically across platforms and devices. Now, a straight-up

billboard seems like a charmingly analog, antique novelty. A relief. Being asked to turn your attention to one single image—to study its symbols and scaffolding, interpret their significance for yourself—feels less like the experience of advertising and more like the experience of art.

Considering the role these structures occupy inside the city, both aesthetically and conceptually, gives us a new way to understand the place we live the way it is right now. Just as Honest Ed's or that cafe on Queen Street became galleries after being shut down but before being bulldozed, many of the material structures that surround us are flaring into art objects while suspended in a precarious present, somewhere between pure function and total obsolescence.

The structures Foster evokes in this exhibit are fascinating because of their physical appearance—the way the light hits them, the shapes and shadows they throw—but also because of what they signify. Before they're removed from the landscape for good, but after their original purpose has dissolved, we can view them in a new light. All that visible scaffolding—lovely in its necessity and in its ugliness, too—calls us back to the concrete realities of Toronto's ecosystem. Turning our attention toward the material life of the city, shifting our perception of these structures onto a higher plane, is the first step towards a deeper kind of appreciation—one that might bolster our ability to resist the encroachment of sameness, of sleekness, of minimalism, of intangible structures. There is magic in the concrete; all you have to do is look.