



# *1911*

An Exhibition by C. Wells



McMaster Museum of Art



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(detail) **the hand loves that which is hard: the #1, virtual**

2000-2002

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## ***Introduction***

*Kim Ness*

*Director and Curator*

Lines on a road hardly seem a source of inspiration for art. Yet, in the rigorously conceived paintings, performances, photography collaborations and installation-based pieces by C. Wells, the directional device first painted by hand on a paved surface in Michigan at the beginning of the 20th century, (and introduced into Canada by the Women's Institute), serves, at the onset of this century, as a rich starting point for a conceptually-based practice that variously references the confluence of pure abstraction and representation; a poetic landscape art; a revivification of the act of painting; the significance of mark-making for the creation of meaning. In **1911**, a precision of execution characterizes the art on exhibition, selections from an ongoing body of work that has progressively and continues to develop a rich artistic concept rooted in a purely functional device.

To complement the C. Wells project, a simultaneous exhibition, **Markers**, (March 10 – April 28, 2002) has been presented at the Museum so as to both inform and extend an interchange of ideas. This permanent collection exhibition exhibits Marcel Duchamp, **Boîtes en Valise** (Series F), 1966-1967; Sir Eduardo Paolozzi, **A New Brand of Brilliance** (Bunk Series), 1949; Christo, **Wrapped Road Sign**, 1988; the Boyle Family, **A Section of Road: Shepherd's Bush, London**, 1969, (on loan from Grizelda P. Hall, The Erica Trust); Gerhard Richter, **Mirror Painting**, 1991 and **Isa**, 1990; Naum Gabo, **Monument to the Astronauts**, c.1966; Alexander Rodchenko, **Untitled**, 1919; Ben Nicholson, **Abstract Painting (Andrew)**, 1924; and Robert Rauschenberg, **Soviet/American Array I**, 1988-1989.

The presentation of **1911** by C. Wells at the McMaster Museum of Art has been made possible through the support of numerous individuals, corporations and government departments. Direct, generous support was provided to C. Wells by Vivien Johnson and Yale Properties Limited;

Tibor Bodi and Manitoba Telecom Systems; John Roach, Mark Darga, Nancy Darga and the Michigan Department of Transportation, and literally allowed the creation of his art. At McMaster University, the support of Security Services for C. Wells' performance, **the hand that loves that which is hard** on March 28, 2002 is similarly appreciated. Both Mark Cheetham and Andrew Hunter deserve recognition for their reflective, insightful and complementary essays which individually provide entry points for a reflection on C. Wells' work. So also has Dr. Walter Peace, Human Geographer, Department of Geology and Geography, McMaster University, offered an alternate avenue for consideration with his March 14, 2002 lecture, "*art, geometry and landscape: the search for order and meaning in the city*". Branka Vidovic, NeoGraphics, was presented with difficult challenges when asked to create the **1911** publication. As always, she has transcended project limitations with her sensitive design. Luc Simard of the National Library provided invaluable support in his role as silent contributor to Canadian, last-minute, art gallery exhibition catalogues.

At the Museum, I am grateful that every member of the staff contribute to the development, presentation and understanding of our exhibitions and programmes for which they deserve mention: Karen Hogue, Michael Howson, Nicole Knibb, Gerrie Loveys, Zora McLachlan, Rose Anne Prevec, and Greg Rennick. Christine Butterfield and Jennifer Petteplace have, in addition, made particular contributions to the **1911** project.

## ***Artist's Acknowledgements***

*C. Wells*

C. Wells gratefully acknowledges all of the staff of the McMaster Museum of Art; Greg Dawe, Rand Anderson, and Karan Chrysler for technical, design and studio support; as well as Shirley Madill and Robert Epp for the ongoing exchange of ideas; and, never least, Ronald and Doreen Wells.



**the hand loves that which is hard: Kitchener**  
2001

### **C. Wells – 1:1**

*Andrew Hunter*  
*Dundas, Ontario*

It is very difficult to write convincingly of painting, to write affected by painting as opposed to about it, which is to describe it. Painting can be explained, but do you get it? Here's the dilemma. When I encounter the paintings of an artist like C. Wells I ask myself, "What is the code, the system that informs and defines the making of this work?" And then inevitably, and perhaps sadly, because of my "upbringing" at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in the 1980s, I ask the next question, "What is the artist's position, the intent here; is this a pose, a theoretical exercise; is it insincere or authentic?" In short, "Are these paintings?" or, on the other hand, are they "painting as model," to borrow a phrase from Yve-Alain Blois.<sup>1</sup>

So much of the painting witnessed in the past twenty years begs these questions. They are questions asked at the end of a powerful trajectory of Modern painting, primarily, but not exclusively, American, that leads to the "endgame" imbedded in Benjamin Buchloh's (mis)reading of Gerhard Richter's<sup>2</sup> paintings or the work of Sherry Levine, for example, in the 1980s. And here's that trajectory in a nutshell: Marcel Duchamp's Readymades (art as idea), Clement Greenberg's painting as paint, Frank Stella's stripes, Jasper Johns' flags, Minimalism, Lawrence Weiner's Conceptualism, all leading to the end of painting, painting as code, beyond the "yellow brick road" where the painter as Great Oz pulls levers and strings behind a velvet curtain. The painter's expressive gesture exposed as a fiction, catalogued and coded. This is the hard road that painting has travelled. C. Wells is not American, but his work is clearly rooted in this powerful trajectory of Modern American painting that sent feeder lines north like the sprawling network of roads that pattern the Canadian landscape. Blacktop and concrete snaking seamlessly across the border inscribed with painted code.

Painting often seems stuck, mired in a dead end, spinning donuts at the end of a cul-de-sac. Where to go? Where to go? Think of Jim Carey as Truman gone berserk racing around a traffic circle, all lanes blocked. But then, having run backwards, he finds the bridge, then the highway, the long straight open road. I realize that in the movie, Truman's car trip does not end in freedom (that comes later via sailboat). But let's pretend it does because the car, hurtling out of town (the actual planned community of Seaside — Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk's flagship of New Urbanism), just works so much better here.

I am convinced C. Wells is making paintings. With regard to the dilemma I mentioned earlier, clearly there is a code underlying his work: the painted road marker. And in terms of the artist's intent, this work is clearly sincere. These are paintings. The road marker is not a system referenced to undermine painting, but one that provides a meaningful framework to continue painting within set parameters. C. Wells believes in painting with all its conditions and limitations. He has found a system that has allowed him to pull out of the monotonous endgame, while at the same time acknowledging the trajectory that led to that very predicament. He has reached back, as many artists have done, to the roots of this predicament in the work of Marcel Duchamp and the act of drawing the utilitarian into the framework of art. Herein lies the beauty of C. Wells' work, what he has drawn from the utilitarian is an act of painting.

1917 and 1911. Two gestures. Each appears to borrow from the other's world, the artist from the utilitarian, the purposeful from the aesthetic. In 1917, Marcel Duchamp plucked the urinal from the hardware store and called it "The Fountain", giving the object a new meaning in its new context. Same object, different rules. In 1911, E.N. Hines (Road Commissioner for the State of Michigan) took the paintbrush and marked the road, the broad gesture of the painter on a flat, horizontal plane, a gesture done in America, for the automobile. So much would be done in America for the automobile in the 20th century. And so much would be done with paint, on a flat horizontal surface in America as well.

The automobile has defined the landscape and the built environment of North America. This is no revelation, it is just plain and obvious today, a given. The suburbs, the Miracle Mile (that string of cheap commercial development along the highway heading into cities and towns), flat stretched out architecture that functions as both building and billboard, the super highway that carries you around cities and bypasses towns left derelict, fast-food restaurants, the drive-thru and the three car garage. The automobile, so the theory goes, killed the downtown, the old world, the pedestrian world. In supplanting this pedestrian world, the automobile also assumed the role of philosophical vehicle, the vehicle of wandering, contemplation and social interaction that walking once held for writers like Jane Austen, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau — out in the landscape, moving slowly through a space of quiet contemplation, like the plein air painter. It is Hines' painted code that guides you through the driven landscape, just as painting once defined the pastoral, highly crafted English landscapes of Capability Brown and the urban parks of Frederick Law Olmsted. C. Wells' work **PLEINAIRISME** points to these exchanges between painting and landscape.

In **PLEINAIRISME**, we are shown the complete cycle, the original (line on the road), the act (artist in the garden painting) and the painting itself (the artifact). The photographic image is peculiar, more than just a straight record of the act of painting. Hines' single white line on the road is framed and isolated by foliage, landscape and architecture. Then there is the painted canvas positioned exactly five inches (the width of Hines' line) to the right of the photograph. The white line that splits the raw canvas is, as always in C. Wells' work, actual size and painted in line marker paint making the painter's gesture an exact copy of the line on the road. 1:1. In the photograph, the canvas is laid flat. This is the orientation of production of all of C. Wells' paintings, whether on canvas or on site, echoing not only the orientation of Hines' gesture, but also, the orientation of American painting (think Pollock) and utilitarian painting (think refinishing a door). **PLEINAIRISME** encapsulates the layered vocabulary of painting that C. Wells is immersed in: a vocabulary that

includes painted gestures and codes beyond the specifics of the art gallery and studio. In working within this expanded field of painting, C. Wells is well within a trajectory of art-making that, again, goes back to Duchamp, and can be traced through Pollock and Robert Rauschenberg's use of commercially produced industrial paints. More specifically, C. Wells' current work can be connected with Lawrence Weiner's **STATEMENTS** of 1968,<sup>3</sup> works like **AN AMOUNT OF PAINT POURED DIRECTLY ON THE FLOOR AND ALLOWED TO DRY**, again paint on a horizontal surface. Weiner's works would gradually expand in scale, taking in vast landscapes, their implied scale occupying entire continents, like Hines' code.

The great Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges once wrote, in a poem called *The Museum*,<sup>4</sup> of a society of geographers who were so obsessed with precision that they produced a map of the world at a scale of 1:1, a map that literally covered the world it represented. Borges said that if you wandered out into the desert you could still find fragments of this tattered map. The network of roads that criss-cross and wind through the world is like Borges' map, as are the landscapes and architecture they form. There are, out there, many abandoned fragments and tattered remnants of past maps, past codes of ordering and understanding the world. There are many roads to nowhere; former highways become forgotten sideroads, bypassed by the super highway. Route 66 is probably the most famous, now an incomplete path of 1950s America. In **PLEINAIRISME**, the artist's space of action is also such a remnant, a very controlled lawn and garden, picturesque traces of Capability Brown downtown, hidden in back of a stark white modern apartment block.

The World Fairs did much to propagate a modern vision of the world, a new world of super highways, uniform architecture, systematized production, processed foods, cleanliness, hygiene, order, quality through sameness and predictability. The New York World's Fair of 1939 was the pinnacle of this promotion of a new modern America with Ford and General Motors staging the most elaborate visionary spectacles with the automobile, obviously, at centre stage. This was the place where an invention like Hines' system would be promoted and marketed since the

core of the World's Fair message was urban planning. It is commonly accepted today that cinema was the dominant art form of the 20th century. I would argue that it shares this honour with urban planning. Modern urban space is an automotive space, a space where the pedestrian is at risk and eyed with suspicion. Pedestrians occupy the unused space, the border or fringe terrain, moving through a space not intended for them and drawing attention to their alienness. At heart, the painter is more pedestrian than driver.

In **PLEINAIRISME**, the artist is viewed (spied on?) from a balcony above giving the image a slightly sinister slant. Who is watching/observing the painter? It is a scene reminiscent of moments in Peter Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract* and the narrative structure of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. In Greenaway's film, the artist (the observer observed), like C. Wells in the back garden, produces views of the highly cultivated and planned landscape (a landscape that really is by Capability Brown). In *Rear Window*, we watch (and watch with) the watcher. In both cases there is the suggestion that there is something not quite right about the act of observing and in both cases the central character is an artist, isolated, viewing the world through a window which mimics a more powerful code. The Draughtsman's window is the framing device he looks through to grid the landscape; the code it mimics is the complex social order of which he will become a victim. Jimmy Stewart's window is the lens of his camera combined with the grid of apartment block windows. In his case, the code is ideas of community and neighbourhood, the detachment and alienation nurtured by the modern urban environment. Like Stewart and the Draughtsman, C. Wells' real subject is a code, a system of defining and ordering the world, a map of the world that, as in Borges', doesn't just represent but conceals. C. Wells ventured out to find the source of this vast map. Through extensive research, a constant in his work, he located and then travelled to the site of Hines' first line — Trenton, Michigan — where he identified and repainted/restored the precise section where the code began, once more positioning himself in a 1:1 relationship with his source. This move on C. Wells' part is

important for another reason. It is evidence of the significance of being in the world, creating a body of work that is not detached and simply theoretical, but, is linked to specific places and sites, histories, communities and individuals.

To escape the confines of the urban, you head for the wilderness, a modern phenomenon made possible again, in North America, by the automobile. Inexpensive cars, the result of Henry Ford's application of Taylorism's modern systematized production, made wilderness leisure accessible to the masses, made tourism boom, and spawned such automotive architecture as the motel, Holiday Inn being the classic example. In Ontario, going north became the dominant tourism destination, a north that was (and is) depicted as all natural, "virgin." To the tourist, the wilderness is always presented as the antithesis of the urban environment, an unordered and unaltered space of rest and rejuvenation, a slower space, the space, again, of Austen, Emerson and Thoreau. But is it? Was it? For over a century the north, Ontario's near north of tourism, has been a gridded terrain of industry, of mining, logging and settlement. Algonquin Park, Ontario's quintessential "virgin" wilderness, is largely recent growth, the park having been widely clear-cut at the end of the 19th century, a space still actively logged. To drive across the park from Huntsville to Whitney on Highway 60 is to take a journey across a terrain of significant social and industrial history. But that won't sell postcards; the image of pure nature does, and this image is the code laid over that terrain.

In **parcel the journey with the destination**, C. Wells layers two powerful modern codes. He maps a journey via Hines, from highway to town to countryside, the vertical lines scripting a very modern dialogue of urban to rural to wilderness. A classic northern woods, echoing the compositions of Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven, is the destination. Here, again, C. Wells has pulled from the everyday. The photomural is not his creation, but is rather a purchased, commercially produced section of wallpaper. The work is cinematic in scale and reminiscent of the projected

backdrops of film. Significantly, it mimics the projected rear window of the filmed interior of the moving car, the classic projection that never seemed to be quite right, the drivers hands wiggling the wheel out of sync with the movement of the passing landscape. In **the hand loves that which is hard: the #1, virtual**, the latest work in C. Wells' ongoing performance/restoration/documentation project, the image of the artist repainting a line on the Trans Canada Highway (**the #1**) is matched to a changing sequence of postcard scenes representing each province. Here again, I am drawn to the projected backdrops of film and then to the background repetition of cheap cartoons (the same rock passing in the background for example), traces of Ford's assembly line production in film. Once you notice this, it can be hard to follow the narrative. How to tell interesting stories, to be genuine, once the underlying code is exposed? This dilemma informs much of C. Wells' activity. He overcomes this dilemma by acknowledging the limitations and restrictions of a code and recognizing the potential for developing meaning through rigidly set parameters. This is obvious in his ongoing engagement with Hines' system. It is also elegantly articulated in his text works, his rotating signs with their narratives given structure and cadence by the mechanics of the presentation (three layers, rotating, requiring memory to retain and carry the narrative) and his erasure pieces (not exhibited in this exhibition) where he works through an existing text and creates verse through the erasure of words, finding another narrative buried beneath the first.<sup>5</sup> C. Wells is here, happily, walking the terrain of John Cage who found beauty in defined systems and applied chance.

C. Wells works, for now, in an unused skating rink hidden inside a monumental failure of urban planning, a downtown mall, largely vacant, the victim of the automobile and suburban malls that are now in turn falling victim to the minivan and super box stores. Since the construction of this failed mall obliterated the past beneath it, there is no history now to draw on, to revive the terrain of its footprint. A once bold visionary statement now reads like arrogant folly. This is the danger imbedded in the scale of modern urban planning with its benchmark in Haussmann's



Paris. There is no dialogue with the past here, no sense of place. This was largely the danger of much of Modernism: each new move made to obliterate its predecessor, and this includes painting. The obvious, easy response to this is to whole-heartedly reject the forms of Modernism and to create — as the movie *Truman* demonstrated with the New Urbanist town of Seaside — an idealized mythical past that never existed, like the “virgin” wilderness of **parcel the journey with the destination**. The alternative is to look for bridges from one code to another, to find meaning in the fragments of the maps Borges spoke of. Like many of us, C. Wells occupies and moves through the fragments of modernism. He is committed to one particular fragment, a system that he lovingly restores, finding specific meaning, local significance, in each stretch of painted road.

E.N. Hines may be the most significant overlooked modern painter in North America, at least I’m going to follow C. Wells’ lead and suggest this. His canvas lay flat decades before Pollock. His scale and the continuous nature of his work (lines continue to be painted on roads everywhere) is beyond anything earth artists like Robert Smithson and Walter DeMaria could dream of. Hines’ painting, completed by others, is a monumental, ongoing execution of Lawrence Weiner’s early processed based works that insisted that the receiver of the idea complete the work of art. I cannot look at the lines on the road anymore without being constantly aware that I am driving through a painting. This is what good art does: it changes your perception of the world. Thank you C. Wells.

<sup>1</sup> Yve-Alain Blois, *Painting as Model*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> See Buchloh and Richter interview in *Gerhard Richter: Paintings*, Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago) and Art Gallery of Ontario, 1988. Buchloh argues that Richter’s work is a cynical exercise that exposes painting as a vocabulary of signs manipulated by the painter.

<sup>3</sup> Exhibition and book work, Seth Seigelaub Gallery, New York, 1968.

<sup>4</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Dreamtigers*, University of Texas, First English Edition, 1964.

<sup>5</sup> C. Wells is currently applying this strategy to sections of the Line Marking section of the Michigan Transportation Manual.



parcel the journey with the destination  
2001–2002



the hand loves that which is hard: the #1, virtual  
2000–2002





the hand loves that which is hard: Trenton  
2001

## ***Painting, Over the Lines: The Social Abstraction of C. Wells***

*Mark Cheetham*

To be different from our everyday lives, yet to make a difference in them, works of art need to be at once approachable and strange. We require a connection — otherwise, we literally won't see — but, there is little point in going exactly where we have been before. For progressive contemporary painters, the familiarity of the medium is a virtue that must also be challenged. Much of Wells' work in **1911** seems familiar as painting, at least to those schooled in the art history of the last fifty or so years. At a glance, it looks like formalist abstraction. For example, **homophone (ks,x)**, from the series titled **yellowyellow** (2000), is strikingly reminiscent of Claude Tousignant's double-banded yellow monochrome **Hommage à van Gogh** (1956). Were they hanging side by side, we would of course also notice many differences: size, a horizontal versus vertical format for the yellow bands, and the equality of the expanses of yellow in the Wells versus the smaller yellow strip at the top of the Tousignant. Similar as they nonetheless look, these paintings don't speak the same language. Where the Tousignant locates its homage in a radical distillation of van Gogh's signature yellow pigment, Wells' painting is decidedly anti-formal. In its unwavering regard for society and its norms, it is what he deems "post-aesthetic." While his work is decidedly material, taking road lines — which Wells thinks of as Painting's found object — into an art context, the work is for the same reason wedded to a tradition of Conceptualism.

On what grounds might we claim that two works that look so neighbourly can be seen to inhabit very different worlds? We know, and can only know, by context. On their own, like words without a sentence, paintings as reductive as these don't tell us much about their possible interpretation. But neither are they meaningless or unchanging. Wells' work trades on how context drives change, how a familiar semiotic system

— the yellow, white, blue, black and, very rarely, red, paint markings on roads and highways — gets us from one place to another without arousing much attention. His exploration is conceptual in its consistent attention to finding and understanding schematic equivalents for the system, but it is, again, material in its rigorous restriction to the matter of road marking itself: the special line marker paint, the small vocabulary of shapes and widths, the restricted palette — chosen for its visibility — that, ironically, we usually attend to only peripherally. Wells' art is figural in its attention to landscape motifs yet also abstract in its historical and semiotic reference points. His pieces are anti-mimetic in the sense that he transposes rather than reproduces the line markings, but, the resulting paintings, photographs, performances, and texts are at the same time post-aesthetic because they can never remain in such an autonomous realm of contemplation. Wells' art is never far from the social concerns of travel, borders, and permissions. He paints over these social lines so that we may better see them. Reminiscent of Robert Smithson's dialectic of site and non-site, in **1911** what is outside art (road painting) crosses a line to the inside (the fine art of painting or photography), but only temporarily and conditionally.

It is one of the paradoxes of the genre that painting over, or "over-painting," can suggest either the erasure or accentuation of a painterly mark. One can paint over a mistake or revise a motif in a canvas and show something else entirely, or one can build up the pigment to emphasize one area. Road marking tends to the latter route, as Wells reminds us by re-painting these lines in **the hand loves that which is hard, #1, virtual** (2000-02). Here he develops his initial image of a road line from the Trans-Canada Highway near Banff, Alberta in 1996 into an ongoing performance, a 10-panel, ink-jet series in which the same road and line are placed in stereotypical landscapes in each Canadian province. His line re-painting in situ on the McMaster University campus for this exhibition is part of this continuing series and underlines the fact that road lines are both highly specific to a place and instantly generalizable, both geographically and by medium. These humble sequences

perform their delimiting safety functions without drama: line marker paint can appear to be the same, and function in the same way, in very different places. We have no trouble believing that the "same" line belongs in a road scene from B.C. or Newfoundland. Wells calls attention to this necessary anonymity in what amounts to a portrait of the road line and his performance of its semiotic life: **PLEINAIRISME** (2001-02). Taken from a high vantage point, a large, sharp-focused photograph shows the artist, back turned to us, working on a large, horizontal canvas. His subject? a line that poses cooperatively in the distance. Using line marker white paint and observing the protocols of width and saturation set in municipal road regulations, Wells portrays this line. The nearly contiguous elements of this two-part work provide context for one another: we cannot go far in thinking that the canvas makes reference to either a materialist or transcendental strain in the history of abstract painting — no Newman zip here; Klee's concept of taking a line for a walk would also acquire new meaning — because the photo brings us back to "reality." Yet its quotidian existence, a line that we would walk across as a pedestrian or drive beside as a motorist with equal oblivion, is temporarily held open to conceptual inspection.

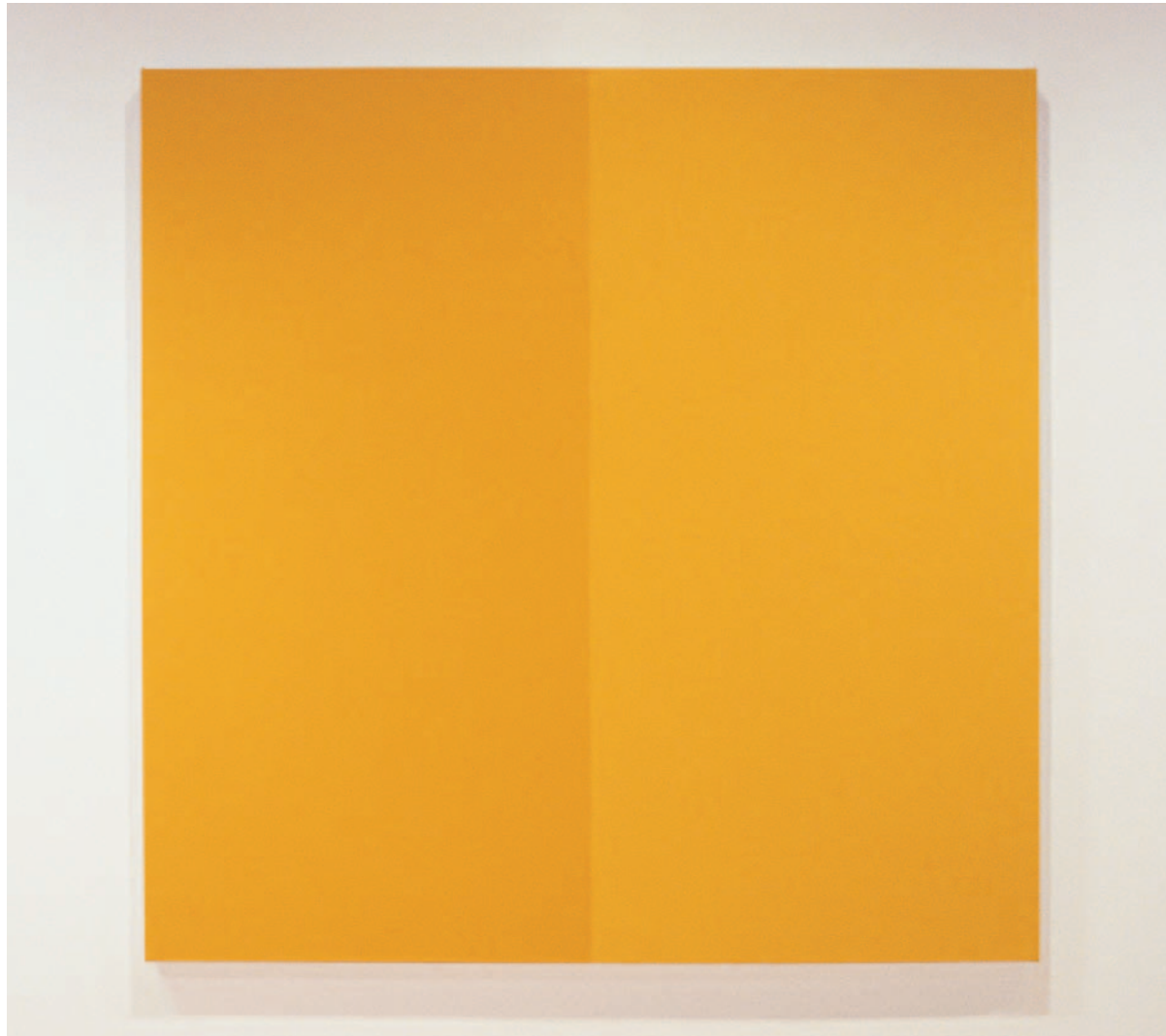
Wells moves road marks into the aesthetic sphere to encourage us to see them more completely. Typically, if we see them at all, it is when we are moving and when, in a sense, they move us from point to point. Thus, in **parcel the journey with the destination** (2001-02), a large photo mural of another, almost clichéd northern landscape is over-painted with the codes of line markings. The transition from yellow lines to white, if we pay attention, means we have moved from highway to town markers. A curve suggests that we can leave the road entirely and arrive. The system works in reverse upon departure. In seeking "unspoiled" nature, we move via the acculturated norms of the road. Our attention to this system is, again, brief at best, though Wells slows the pace for us here and again in a more overtly time-based piece whose title plays with that of the exhibition: **nein, teen, 11** (2001-02). Here Wells adopts a unique vehicle for his meditation, a "Rotographic" advertising board whose

pyramidal bars rotate in unison to give us three related but discontinuous texts. Trying to read any one of the sequential texts that Wells has painstakingly applied to each bar can be frustrating because he has put far too much text on the accumulated surface. The machine inevitably accomplishes its interruptive move to the next panel before we have time to read many lines. Wells has calculated that it would take about forty minutes of sustained viewing — and an excellent short-term memory — to read the entire, 900-word sign completely. We travel with the text here, just as we do with the lines Wells writes about in this piece and both photographs and paints in others.

The first road marker lines were painted in 1911. Wells has re-painted (or painted over) a section of this original site in a homage performance, reclaiming a history in Trenton, Michigan, where these first lines were set down. In the exhibition **1911**, we see his typically filtered versions of this memorial activity. The number eleven, he muses, is in a sense a portrait of the common double road line. We see this image in the most abstract-looking of the paintings in this exhibition: **threeway** (2000). Part of the **yellowyellow** series, this painting also builds on Wells' 1998 **two ways of achieving an end**. Instead of two double line "elevens," here we have three. Each "way" is strictly instrumental, a technique for marking a road's median, of warning drivers where their permission to travel ends. In the southwestern U.S.A., Wells discovered, the blending of road, earth, and sky has necessitated the bold edging of a black line inside two yellows that we see on the left in **threeway**. Moving from left to right across this image, and also both geographically and temporally, we then see the most familiar portrait, the double yellow line. This version, however, is painted in the original yellow *oil* line marker paint. A newer version of this line marker paint, a yellow latex pigment, is seen on the right. In **homophone (ks,x)**, Wells puts the two paint types side by side, with equal emphasis, so that one can see their subtle differences, their different "ways." The oil and latex yellows serve the same function on the "thruway" whose name he invokes, but in a painting, their discrimination matters.



**threeway**  
from the **yellowyellow** series 2000



**homophone (ks,x)**  
from the **yellowyellow** series 2000



**Painting Ends**  
from the **yellowyellow** series 2000-2001

**Painting Ends** (2000-01) places the two yellows in a temporal display of literal over-painting. Transposing two curb ends, each the standard six inches wide, Wells has painted latex yellow over the “older” oil, leaving overlaps to remind us of the painting-over practices that we can see on the road itself, traces remaining as uses change or perimeters need to be re-marked. As in **TRENTON** (2001), where lines from the road reveal their new inhabitation of high art painting by fitting perfectly within the panels’ boundaries, the “ends” here are schematic. They function as repeatable templates. Wells typically mixes historical research with conceptual questioning. He found out from a road painter in Calgary that lines, ends, and the like were, in the 1950s and before, set down by hand, using wooden templates. But **Painting Ends** is not produced this way, nor does it refer solely to road painting. In this worldly genre, an “end” is a limit or perhaps a functional goal. In the history of abstract painting especially, “end” connotes a terminus, a point of either futility or transcendence that has been envisioned in monochrome painting since Malevich’s Suprematism and Rodchenko’s materialism. These speculations on the end of painting took place within a decade of 1911 and have been renewed several times since. Thinking of how Wells’ paintings, photographs, and performances link the everyday world and that of painting’s habits and traditions, however, we might well ask what his work can say about Painting’s ends, its role and purpose within the social fabric. To this purpose, let me imagine a rotographic text piece that takes off from **PLEINAIRISME**, one that — following Wells’ punning practices — I will call **Plain/Heir/Ism**.

In his two-part work with this name and in the exhibition generally, Wells plays with the tradition of painting outdoors, *en plein air*, in front of the motif, that we think of as quintessentially French. But as we have seen, he constantly schematizes, moves, and thus examines the ultimate outdoor painting, that done with line marker paint, by bringing it indoors and into “art.” Substituting “plain” for “plein” suggests the connection to the semiotically saturated social world we live in, with its often invisible rules, boundaries, and materials. Plain is unpretentious

but not unsophisticated: a new latex yellow superseding a slower-drying oil. The line we see in **PLEINAIRISME**, framed by foliage and then by canvas, is plain in these ways. It works. “Heir” is of course what painting today is as a genre, the inheritor of high art traditions. One does not need to paint consciously in the wake of these habits and reference points to have them figure in contexts of reception. To produce the abstract work in **1911** is to work in a line of production that includes the monochrome, field painting, formalism, Conceptualism, and even the diagrammatic realities of Peter Halley’s conduits. In the same way, contemporary painting cannot but be the heir of many “isms,” from the sweeping ones such as Modernism and Postmodernism, to those with more local inflections and varying suffixes. Especially when one paints in a way that looks abstract, “heir” and “ism” pull towards a separate world of aesthetic priorities and concerns. But in Wells’ practice, “plain” keeps the social in our minds. Or perhaps he reminds us that the social has, more often than not, been in view in abstraction. Mondrian designed Neo-Plasticism to function as a template for ideal relations in society. Even Clement Greenberg, seen so often as the arch formalist, wrote in his early essays that art needed to retreat to its own presumably autonomous realm in order, ultimately, to lead society once more. Even when an artist does not intend a work to have social meaning, it may turn out to figure in this context. Think of the spectacular career of Newman’s **Voice of Fire** (1967), which was a touchstone of American cold-war liberty in the American Pavilion at Expo ‘67 and then the butt of public outcries when purchased by the National Gallery in Ottawa just over a decade ago. Contexts and meanings change, as we see in the movement from the road to the gallery and back in Wells’ work generally. Walking or driving down the street, we may well reconceive the evanescent social life of abstraction.



## *nein, teen, 11*

*C. Wells*

# nein

*The psychology of a tier.*

Hitler met with Willy Hof and then with Fritz Todt, and the *Autobahn* changed from a capitalist bourgeois waste of money to a National Socialist machine, 'Volksgemeinschaft' was the word. Existing precursors, including experimental highways in Berlin built between 1913 and 1921 and Italy's 130-kilometer *Autostada* toll way were never to be historically thought of again. Many miles of roadway were built during the time of the Third Reich, not because Hitler saw the construction as a military advantage or certainly not for its benefit as a job-creation programme. It was the influence of the imageable...it was ROAD AS PROPaganda. ROAD FEVER. WHITE LINES INDEED.

Earlier EDWARD HINES, the turn of the 20th century Road Commissioner for the State of Michigan, USA, was travelling behind a leaking milk truck that was leaving a stream-line down the middle of the road. Driving around a corner known for side-sweeps and head on hits, Hines looked at the spilled milk and imagined a road surface visually divided, perhaps evoking a spatial collision cure...and the world's first painted line markers appeared in Trenton, MI, in 1911. Located on River Road, which became West Jefferson Avenue, Trenton was the starting point simply because of its location. It was the last high ground from Detroit to Monroe and already had electric lights and street signs. Let there be light and letters before lines, was the WHITE LINE DEED.

# teen

*The psychology of a tear.*

In Leeds, North England, once a month local roads are grassed over for a day, allowing its youth the full yet tenuous illusion that the street is a park, field, or even rolling knoll. GREEN OVER GRADE. SURFACE MEMORIES. MEMORIES SURFACE. NOSTALGIA TREADS ON.

Line markers are a street's pop culture signifier. When employed in media, a line marker can index notions of romantic travel, (un)manageable distance, urban angst, individuality, the collective march, the pace of life, the scrap of the city or even the escapist country way. Viewed in multi-perspective, wet with rain, dusty dry, freshly paved or dilapidated; coloured by traffic lights, pinpointed by headlights, or bathed in sunlight, line markers are hard emotive currency. Directed figures stand balanced on them like tauten trapeze artists; walk towards us full of pomp presentation or away to distant horizons. Vehicles balletic in their unity move between them, choreographed á la Tati. All of this can lead to an *atelier* query...are line marker paintings related to the tradition of Pop Art? Appealing to youth and the young at heart the world over, POP ART beckoned a response to its directness — jaunty and everyday. Line marker paintings are not that extroverted. They instead seek to communicate in a non-picturesque way, happy to hum rather than sing. They rely on the written word but not the slogan. Visually stunted, they are orally unmentionable in continuity, all the while distant in their ready-made image manner. They are however machine-loving; mechanistic and middletown, adroitly extolling painting-in-the-world and plurality. LINE MARKER PAINTINGS AS COMMON MEN.

# 11

*The psychology of a dear.*

Ordain with affection the number eleven as line marker's holy number. Deed this upon the sacred ground of Trenton, Michigan, the land of the brushed visual, some ninety years ago. Two lines, parallel and never joining are ELEVEN. X I in Roman numerals (schematically alike the painting 'Trenton'). Pronounced i-'le-v&n, eleven is: a cardinal number, a prime number, a Lucas number, a whole number, the fourth number that stays the same when written upside down. In numerology, eleven is a visionary or an artist, endeavouring to expand a group's consciousness. Its etymology is Middle English, from enleven, adjective, from Old English's endleofan, from end (alteration of An one) + leofan; akin to lEon or to lend. Lucky in the West eleven symbolizes transition as well as conflict and struggle. Eleven doubles the symbolism of the number one and is generally related to doubles. Eleven is a noun and a pronoun plural in construction.

While taking 'elevenes' over biscuits and tea, it was conveyed to me by R & D, that the 'eleven-plus' examination was a test integral to my heritage, a dictator of future ways. In this manner eleven is a let down; fronting as an appropriate age to wave some dreams by and halt others. I'll believe eleven was just a victim of labour in a then Conservative Party Britain. Labour is behind everything that matters, salt-crusted by *numbers*: numbers as in the eligible, the quantity, an aggregate, the assigned company, the standard, the procedure, the precisely reckoned, a census, the sum total, the full count. May line marker endeavours never reach this eleventh hour.



## Biographies:

**Andrew T. Hunter** is an independent artist, writer and curator based in Dundas, Ontario. He has produced contemporary and historical exhibitions, publications and writings for public art galleries and artist-run centres across Canada and in the United States. Hunter has also held curatorial positions at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, Kamloops Art Gallery and Vancouver Art Gallery. In 1999 he curated the site installation project *Sacred Presence* for the St. Norbert Arts and Cultural Centre in Winnipeg. Current projects include exhibitions for the Confederation Centre Art Gallery, the Art Gallery of Ontario/National Gallery of Canada, the Banff Centre, and the McMichael Canadian Collection. Hunter has written extensively on contemporary Canadian art. Recent publications include *Billy's Vision* (1999), *Ding Ho/Group of 7* (with Gu Xiong, 2000), *Lawren Harris: A Painter's Progress* (2000), *Jan Wade Sanctified* (2001), *Stand By Your Man* (2001), *In the Pines* (2001), *Tom Thomson* (June 2002).

**Mark Cheetham** is the author and coeditor of six books, most recently *Kant, Art, and Art History: Moments of Discipline* (2001). He has curated two nationally circulated exhibitions, *Memory Works* in 1990-91 and *Disturbing Abstraction: Christian Eckart*, 1996-98. Cheetham received a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship in 1994 and a Sterling & Francine Clark Art Institute Fellowship in 2000. He is a Professor in the Department of Fine Art at the University of Toronto.

Hamilton-based **C. Wells** has exhibited across Canada and was a contributing artist to the 1994 Expo Arte: Le Forum de la Theorie de l'art Contemporain in Guadalajara, Mexico through Plug-In Gallery, Winnipeg. Selected recent exhibitions include: *'and then we take berlin'*, Kitchener ArtWorks, Contemporary Art Forum; *Mitchell: Southwest Triennial*, Museum London; *A to B: Post-Aesthetic Painting*, The New Gallery, Calgary; *New Artists, New Works*, Muttart Gallery, Calgary; *C.Wells (see well)*, Brian Melynchenko Gallery, Winnipeg. Wells received his B.A. from the University of Guelph, then studied at McMaster University and the Ontario College of Art before receiving a BEd (Art/History) from the University of Manitoba.

## List of Works

**parcel the journey with the destination** 2001-2002  
road line marker paint on wallpaper  
104" x 160"

**PLEINAIRISME** 2001-2002  
road line marker paint on canvas,  
photograph  
36" x 144"

**TRENTON** 2001  
road line marker paint on canvas  
(two panels )  
72" x 144"

**nein, teen, 11** 2001-2002  
text on electric rotating sign  
30" x 20" x 3"

**the hand loves that which is hard:  
the #1, virtual** 2000-2002  
ink jet prints (10 panels)  
18" x 200"

**threeway** from the **yellowyellow**  
series 2000  
road line marker paint on canvas  
60" x 60"

**homophone (ks,x)** from the  
**yellowyellow** series 2000  
road line marker paint on canvas  
60" x 60"

**Painting Ends** from the  
**yellowyellow** series 2000-2001  
road line marker paint on canvas  
60" x 60"

