



CAR, *Restraining Oli*, 1996, video, 00:09:43. Courtesy of the artists.

Adult Supervision

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When Michelle Grabner and Brad Killam set up their independent studio practices in the early 1990s, they were already a family unit, raising two young boys in Milwaukee. It seemed only natural that Grabner's investigation of the immediate (evidenced in her paintings of domestic textiles), combined with an interest in collaboration, would compel her to work with the people she saw every day. Together, the family formed CAR (Conceptual Art Research), a collective which became a platform for experimentation, formed "out of examining our clumsy, middle-class, suburban domicile, churning our observations and questions into projects."¹ Over the next roughly 10 years, CAR produced a variety of materials, research, and projects, including the body of film and video works featured in the exhibition *I Work From Home*. The videos range widely in format and style, but are extremely consistent in theme: domestic life. Taking on the appearance of intimate home movies or low-budget TV, they cover subjects of child-rearing, leisure, culinary skills, and suburban aesthetics with vitality, affection, and subtle comedic flair.

The earliest CAR videos are "documentary," capturing daily occurrences. *Oli/Wipe* (1994), shot on black-and-white Super 8 film, is a close-up of Grabner changing her son Oliver's diaper. It feels odd at first to see this procedure documented, but as the camera rolls it becomes almost hypnotic; tender yet efficient motions, the awkward vulnerability.² *Pool* (1996), also shot on film, shows Oliver splashing about in the backyard, boisterously testing out his body and surroundings (at one point wiping out with Buster Keaton-like flair). *Oli Broad Jump* (1996) shows the now 3-year-old running around the living room, crouching in a doorway before leaping across the floor. Slowed down and staggered, the movement is sequenced, like an amateur Eadweard Muybridge motion study. Viewed together, these works show an arc of independence: increasing child mobility and growing parental distance (physical and psychic). There are notes of nostalgia, but they are subtle, and the fact that these works are silent emphasizes the visual/physical above the particular, the actions over the event.

1. Michelle Grabner, "Test Family: Children in Contemporary Art," *New Art Examiner*, 27:2, October 1999, 22-23, 60.

2. A later work, *Wipe/Abscess* (1996) combined this footage with an even closer-up shot of a pustule being carefully burst on an adult rear.



CAR, *Sylvia Pugoli and Where is the Green Parrot?*, 1995, looped videos with sound and installation with children's furniture. Installation view, Art Chicago, 1995. Courtesy of the artists.

Restraining Oli (1996) is more of a performance/endurance piece: Grabner and Killam take turns attempting to lull the fidgeting toddler. Eventually, after squirming through every possible position, he settles down, sleepily blinking his eyes—the whole thing is like an exercise in oppositional energies. In *Sylvia Pugoli* (1995), Killam sits down at a table and addresses the camera with the name of Italian NPR correspondent Sylvia Poggioli (Grabner attributes the misspelling of the name in the work's title to a pre-Internet era). After a brief pause, Killam repeats the name again, warmly, patiently, with a slightly different inflection, again, and again. This work was originally made to loop constantly on a monitor, with a counterpart, *Where is the Green Parrot?* (1996), in which Grabner recites a line from a popular children's book. These videos relate to the artists' interest in early childhood pedagogy, the need for exposure and repetition to build vocabulary, and ultimately, larger capacities like socio-political awareness and visual analysis.

By combining the labor of parenting with artistic labor, Grabner and Killam connect with another collaborative, the N.E. Thing Company, founded in 1966 by Canadian artists Iain and Ingrid Baxter, who often used family activities as occasions for investigative art production.³ By charging the banal (piles of firewood, vacant landscapes) with aesthetic and playfully corporatized value, N.E. Thing Co. sought to look at the immediate environment differently: "By making life more interesting for others, we may indirectly help to alleviate the human condition. We up your aesthetic quality of life, we up your creativity. We celebrate the ordinary."⁴ So too does the playful gaze of CAR take up the simplest gestures, the most familiar settings, as apparatus for growth, discovery, care, and social bonds.

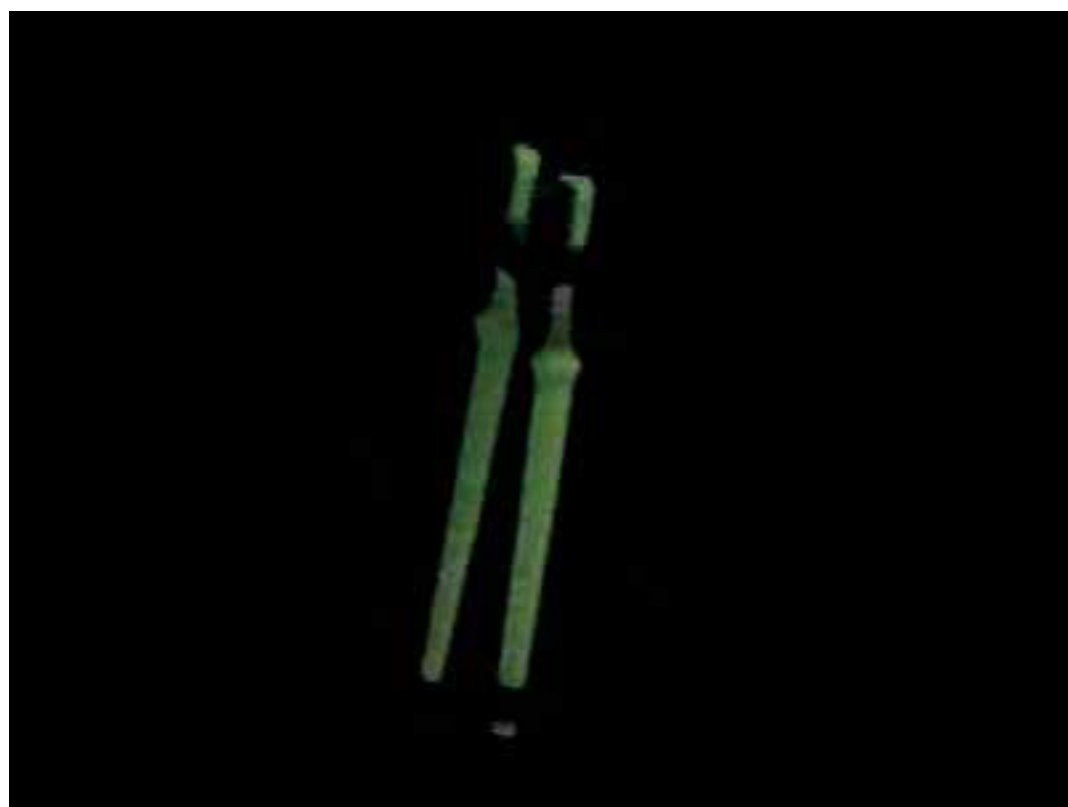
In the mid-1990s, CAR began collaborating with artist David Robbins, known for his interest in the tension between entertainment and culture, developed through an often comedic and non-commercial approach to art.⁵ Together, Robbins and CAR produced a trilogy of cooking shows called *Cooking with Confidence* (1996). In his lyrically deadpan tone, Robbins proceeds to demonstrate (not altogether confidently) how to make "The Spritz," "Scottish Shortbread Cookies," and "The Merry Christmas Cookie." There are segues (about the softened butter, "You know, a suit this color would be quite nice, really"), mistakes (cherries are left whole instead of being chopped into garnish), and politically-tinged musings ("You want to place these on a lightly greased pan, with about an inch between each one of the...uh... shapes, so that they can expand *freely*. This is a very American kind of cooking"). After he picks up the Super Shooter appliance needed for spritz cookies, the barrel malfunctions and explodes, leaving a pathetic smattering of dough on the cooking sheet, which the host holds up, unable to contain his laughter.

A cooking show parody before cooking shows were ubiquitous, *Cooking with Confidence* relates to Martha Rosler's video, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), in which the artist holds up various implements, naming each before using them in absurdly violent gestures. It also calls up the domestic comedies of Michael Smith, in which his hapless alter ego, Mike, fumbles through empty domestic routines and mass media fantasies. *Mike Builds A Shelter* (1985), a narrative of preparation for nuclear fallout, is punctuated by clips from *Mike's Show*, a TV program which includes a cooking

3. Grabner looks to N.E. Thing Co. as a CAR forbearer in "Test Family: Children in Contemporary Art." See also Charlotte Townsend-Gault's description of "The Company eye as determined to probe and transform the insignificant and the meretricious not by theorizing it, not by composing it, not by nominating it as kitsch, but by reevaluating it—in the self-evident faith that this could be done just by doing it," in "The Unobviousness of the Obvious," *You Are Now in the Middle of A N.E. Thing Co. Landscape* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Fine Arts Library, 1993).

4. N. E. Thing Company quoted by Nancy Shaw, "Siting the Banal: The Expanded Landscapes of the N.E. Thing Co." *You Are Now in the Middle of A N.E. Thing Co. Landscape* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Fine Arts Library, 1993), 25.

5. Robbins is known for his project *The Ice Cream Social* (1993-2008), which first took place in a Baskin Robbins in Manhattan, and later in galleries and locations around the world, taking the form of a lighthearted social event. As Robbins describes, "Ice cream socials are simple, fun affairs, but as gatherings that celebrate the joys of gathering they're also self-conscious ones. They establish temporary communities and a really pure kind of casual participatory theater..." (davidrobinsics.com, accessed December 3, 2013). The symbol of a melting blob of ice cream in the Baskin Robbins colors (pink, brown, and white) can be seen in the background of the *Cooking with Confidence* videos.



CAR, *Toothbrush*, 1996, video, 00:01:20. Courtesy of the artists.

demonstration with leftovers from Mike's fridge (broccoli and broccoli water).⁶ William Wegman's early video work *Massage Chair* (1972-1973) also comes to mind, though instead of a cooking show Wegman takes up the guise of a home-shopping channel demo, selling a simple metal frame chair and a bat as a sophisticated massage system. In an altogether different brand of instructional video, CAR and Robbins's work *One Mother's Love* (2002) opens with a shot of Grabner making chocolate chip cookies in her kitchen, a voice over considering the importance of guiding teens through the temptations of vice. After picking up supplies at her local convenience store, Grabner proceeds to explain how to roll a joint—"better they learn it from me"—only it's filled with oregano. For these artists, the tele-visual world is a mutable, performative platform; they offer up low-fi humor, imperfection, and the comedy of everyday objects and anxieties, along with the theatrics they inspire.

For *Dale Chihuly Glass Camp for Boys* (2002) Grabner and Killam took up the format of a TV commercial, advertising an idyllic country setting where children learn glass blowing. A twangy folk instrumental plays over-top scenes of workshop sessions, frolicking on sandy hillsides, and boys proudly displaying their creations. "REGISTER NOW," the commercial urges, without supplying any of the necessary information. Like the inverse of Robbins's commercials for contemporary art spaces and exhibitions, which air on public access channels (he has made several for Grabner and Killam's endeavors), *Dale Chihuly Glass Camp for Boys* creates an ambiguous aesthetic space, where goods and services are presented to their "unnatural" audiences.⁷ In *Holiday Lights* (2002), Grabner and Killam capture the elaborate Christmas displays in their current neighborhood of Oak Park, IL, a suburb of Chicago. Each home is attributed to fictional occupants (the Norbert and Marilyn Wojcek residence is particularly charming), and the images fade in and out to the tune of a smooth, jazzy holiday song. "COMING SOON" the final screen reads, as if advertising a future attraction (one, no doubt, family-friendly). For Grabner, the suburbs have always been a platform to investigate the ordinary appearance of things: how do these routines, traditions, and values create normalcy? And, what in them makes for "the good life"?

A particularly unassuming CAR video, *Toothbrush* (1996) depicts the final stage of a nightly regime. Four yellow brushes stand out against a faux marble wall, and when the lights go out, two of them radiantly glow-in-the-dark, slowly fading into an extended, complete blackness. There is something so precise about this one-liner, this utilitarian object becoming briefly spectacular, in the most diminutive sense. Something about quality of existence being defined by how you look at things; not, say, with a "positive attitude," but simply being able to look at things and see them as *things*, and, to keep seeing them.

6. In another of Smith's works, *It Starts at Home* (1982), ordinary domestic activities are inadvertently cablecast on television. For a discussion of Smith's engagement with the domestic, including Mike's musing that he "should've been a suburban upper middle-class housewife," see Annette Carlozzi, Regine Basha, Jay Sanders, and Ingrid Schaffner, "Mike'ification: Four curators sitting around talking about you know who..." *Mike's World: Michael Smith & Joshua White (And Other Collaborators)* (Austin: The Blanton Museum of Art, 2008), 108-109.

7. Chihuly, known as the "greatest living master of the ancient medium of glass," lost his eye in a car accident in 1976. In the final frame of Grabner and Killam's video, two boys wear eye patches in a display of idolatry.