

## GUY BEN-NER

BY THOM DONOVAN

ated with childhood wonder and domestic acculturation. *Stealing Beauty* was the last video Ben-Ner made with his family; the group acts out a family drama in IKEA stores that deals with the relationship between private property, exchange value, and kinship. Ben-Ner and his family migrate throughout various branches of the store in Europe and are continually discovered making the piece by security.

With the passing of Ben-Ner's children into adolescence and the finalization of the artist's divorce, Ben-Ner's recent videos give shape to a life of wandering—between international destinations and personal relationships, between success in the art world and resisting the commodity fetishism accompanying these successes. In this interview, Ben-Ner discusses the transition from his earlier "family" videos to a new period in his work—one that maintains the craftiness of his earlier work but extends into the space of worlds beyond the domus. This transition clearly takes place in *Drop the Monkey*, a video framed by Ben-Ner's separation from his wife and his beginning a new relationship. The piece was made shot-by-shot (that is, without editing) during plane trips between Israel and Berlin, where Ben-Ner's girlfriend lived at the time. A PERFORMA 09 commission, the video piece openly questions the ethics of artmaking, and where the divide should be drawn between art and personal relations. In *If Only It Was as Easy to Banish Hunger by Rubbing the Belly as It Is to Masturbate*, shot in Western Massachusetts, Ben-Ner travels by airplane, car, and bicycle while quoting mostly travel literature. Making art through these meanderings, he turns the constraints posed by the material and lived circumstances of the work into a kind of content. The result is a response to the artist's sense of displacement, and the madness that accompanies loss, transition, and change.

—Thom Donovan



In the end I got none.

*Drop the Monkey*, 2009, color video with sound. Total running time: 8 minutes, 33 seconds. All images courtesy of the artist and Postmasters, New York.

In Guy Ben-Ner's early works, the Israeli artist used his children and wife as players in narratives adopted from major works of world literature: *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moby-Dick*, and Jean Marc Gaspard Itard's early 19th-century account of the Wild Boy of Aveyron, France. Using his family's apartment as a stage set, and the materials available to resourceful ends, Ben-Ner wittily dramatized the conditions of making work out of meager means. A refrigerator lights a giant book whose pages are turned by Ben-Ner and his son Amir; the nozzle from a kitchen sink protrudes from a tarp, giving the illusion of a whale's blowhole. Through such means, Ben-Ner has become associ-

THOM DONOVAN: I watched *Second Nature* and *If Only...* tonight. I am thinking about the significance of their many literary allusions: *Waiting for Godot*, *Aesop's Fables*, *The Little Prince*, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *The Divine Comedy*, *King Lear*, *Don Quixote*, and many other classic works of Western European literature. How does literature influence your work and how do you come to use source texts?





*Moby Dick*, 2000, color video, silent.  
Total running time: 12 minutes, 35 seconds.

**GUY BEN-NER:** In my earlier movies, literature functioned more like a construction upon which I could mount my own material. The grand narratives I am interested in have a peculiar trait: they pretend to be inherited rather than acquired. Most people think they know *Moby-Dick* without ever really reading the book. When I first read *Robinson Crusoe*, I already felt I was revisiting it. Everybody knows what the Oedipus complex is, though I doubt many people actually read Freud on it. These narratives are so well integrated into our culture—they actually *form* this culture—that it feels like you get them from looking at milk cartons and Corn Flakes boxes. In the same way, IKEA showrooms look familiar; you feel like you're back home, although it never was anyone's home. I think grand narratives are exactly what you can never revisit—you were never with them, and yet they never really left you. It might seem simple to bring grand narratives down into one's kitchen, but the relationship is complicated. The "fiction" and my "reality" had to enter into conversation—in *Wild Boy*, for example, my son really does utter his first English word on-screen, just as the wild boy does. He gets his first haircut and you see him barely managing to dress alone for the first time. It's both reality and fiction. The fictive element was structured as a "play within a play," (the obvious example would be the play staged in *Hamlet*) and that



*Second Nature*, 2008, color video with sound. Total running time: 10 minutes.



fiction serves as a motor to generate real events in the actual life of the participants. None of the "readymade" material I use comes from the desire to pay homage to this or that artist/writer. I'm using source material as a survival kit, as building blocks; I don't know any other way. I hope this doesn't come off as some kind of intellectual game—it isn't. The "knowledge" I use, those quotations, are a stick to help me walk. I would limp otherwise.

TD: I like what you are saying about starting from practicalities in *If Only...* It seems like you did the same in *Drop the Monkey* by using a remote control to operate the camera, making it possible to edit the movie shot by shot by physically moving to the next shot. Could you talk about your relationship to cinema? Your films are very much about technique/technicality. Slapstick is there, for sure. And silent pictures (your *Moby Dick* is silent). I wonder what cinematic influences shaped *If Only...* and *Drop the Monkey*.

GBN: There were no specific cinematic influences for those two movies. Not in the way *Household* refers to *A Man Escaped* or *Wild Boy* to *Wild Child* and *The Kid*. But I did think about road movies as a genre for *If Only...* Genres are interesting as a form invested with ideological content. "Nature documentaries" and "family sitcoms" are not just empty forms waiting to be filled with content, they are content. So I tried to understand what that form meant to me. But on the whole, *If Only...* is more busy with literary sources than cinematic ones. *Drop the Monkey* starts from the economic and social contracts it is based on. It is a self-reflective film in the sense that its production and subject matter are one and the same. In the last couple of years my work was being commissioned and I didn't know what to do with the production money, since I was used to working very cheaply. I didn't feel comfortable, so I had to deal with that issue as subject matter.

TD: What made you uncomfortable about the PERFORMA commission?

GBN: The strong belief that it is important to be able to make art cheaply.

TD: I also view your early work as being about contracts—the contract with your family (a primitive contract of capitalist economic relations). Is this wrong-headed of me?

GBN: No, you are correct. But it is something you can only see in retrospect. If not for the last two movies, that word "contract" might have not come up in relation to the earlier movies.

TD: The fact that you're flying alone on so many plane trips seems important to *Drop the Monkey*. I mean, other than the man who bumps into you, did you have any collaborators? It folds back on the problem of solipsism you put forth in an earlier piece, *Berkeley's Island*: a person alone in a domesticated space. What is the significance of your making *Drop the Monkey*

alone and in a dialogue with only yourself?

GBN: I agree that *Drop the Monkey* refers back to *Berkeley's Island*, but the new solipsism came out of a technical need: the cheapness I was after. I decided the shots should look very cheap. Otherwise it would justify the money spent, and I wanted it to be felt as a waste. So the shots had to look amateurish, as if I was making them just to get them out of the way. That's why I handle the camera myself, zooming or panning with the remote control while I am on-screen. Things evolved out of necessity. Of course, solitude later becomes part of the content as well—the feeling of being left alone. This phenomenon happens quite often. *Elia*, for instance, is a movie being screened in reverse. The initial reason was technical—Amir was only three at the time and he was not able to imitate my movements as needed for the movie. So I imitated him and screened it backward; it looks as if he is imitating me in a way a child his age would never be able to. Later, other ideas attached themselves to this technical decision. It became an allegory: screened backward, your footprints are being "swallowed" back by your feet, so you leave no trace as to where you are coming from. Much like an immigrant, you erase your past. In the same way, I started with silent movies because it was easier to work with the children. It's also easier to put words in their mouths. Later, the silence became part of the content, as in *Wild Boy*, where both the mute boy and early silent cinema are being tamed by language and sound.

TD: One might read the decision to use Melville, Defoe, and *The Wolf Boy* as critiques of bourgeois atomization and the family as a ground for this atomization. I was wondering if you chose them for this reason, and not only because they were found or available narratives. When that window shatters in *Berkeley's Island*, that says it all to me. The outside world crashes against the lone ego, the interiorization that household and family represent.

GBN: I did choose these narratives because I could use them critically, of course, but I was applying them to myself first and foremost, problematizing my own position. Since I am part of a certain society, the arrows I aim at myself might also hit the larger target. Sometimes the personal issues you deal with and the larger political issues are the same. Actually, they usually are. I don't know how to tickle other people unless I find out which parts of my own body are the most sensitive. So I start from my own armpit, not from the big, bourgeois one. Only the bourgeois start from the large armpit.

But speaking of criticality and awareness, it's easy to read things in retrospect. Things fit as if there was a master plan from the start. But after I made my first movie, I had no plan; I was just trying to keep the motor running. Then I made the next movie and the





*Stealing Beauty*, 2007, color video with sound.  
Total running time: 17 minutes, 40 seconds.



next one and all of a sudden there is a path I have traveled. I look back, realize a direction, and make another choice—a more conscious one, perhaps.

TD: The appearance of the Israeli flag in *Berkeley's Island* seems like a curious image. Kind of stunning, actually. To what extent do you consider your works a reflection of your Jewish-Israeli identity? Also, to what extent might we take *Berkeley's Island* as a critique of Israeli foreign policy and geopolitics—its pioneer status in the Mideast; its solipsism or sense that it is an island?

GBN: Well, I do see Israel as a political island. But I think it would be putting too much on the slim shoulders of this first movie to claim that it deals with Israeli foreign policy. Enough to say that it is there in the background, because it is part of my background. To tell you the truth, I just needed something that would move with the wind coming from the ventilator. So the flag was very effective. But I did choose a flag and not something else. Later on, the same motives you men-



*Wild Boy*, 2004, color video, silent. Total running time: 17 minutes.



*If Only It Was as Easy to Banish Hunger by Rubbing the Belly as It Is to Masturbate*, 2009, color video with sound. Total running time: 17 minutes, 36 seconds.

***I'M USING SOURCE MATERIAL AS A SURVIVAL KIT, AS BUILDING BLOCKS; I DON'T KNOW ANY OTHER WAY. I HOPE THIS DOESN'T COME OFF AS SOME KIND OF INTELLECTUAL GAME—IT ISN'T. THE "KNOWLEDGE" I USE, THOSE QUOTATIONS, ARE A STICK TO HELP ME WALK. I WOULD LIMP OTHERWISE.***

tioned are more consciously activated in *Treehouse Kit*, my second *Crusoe* movie. There I can take more responsibility regarding the direct political allusions of the piece.

TD: You talk about "dejection" in *Drop the Monkey*. Dejection out of love, but also because a contract has made you wander in order to fulfill your agreement to produce a video under certain constraints and by a certain deadline. The significance of dejection seems explosive given that you are traveling between Berlin and Israel—an irony you pointed out in your talk with Jon Kessler at Cooper Union this past November. Dejection is also the mantra of the t-shirt you wear in the film: I WISH I WAS SOMEWHERE ELSE. The deject always needs to be somewhere else; it's a melancholic condition, a diasporic one. Adopting your own fathers and mothers (you use the term "adoption" to describe your relationship to grand narratives) seems to fit well with this disposition. You give birth only to yourself, like Kierkegaard says. In *Moby-Dick*, too, Ishmael is rescued by the ship *Rachel* by way of conclusion.

GBN: Yes. And *Elia* is also a story of wandering—the grounded bird, which is nothing but legs. I thought an ostrich was the perfect image of the wandering Jew. A head buried in the ground, after all, is not so different from a head in the clouds. That was the movie I made after leaving Israel. For quite a while I have been dealing with home and homelessness in my work, both personally and politically, but I think it has taken on a biographical edge in the last years that



has sharpened it. I returned to Israel for family reasons a bit more than a year ago; I was not feeling at home there anymore, but at the same time I was not feeling at home anywhere else. I came to accept that feeling as a positive one. Feeling not at home everywhere. In a way, the last movies respond to a feeling of homelessness. The dialogue in *If Only...* mentions this, but it is especially present in *Drop the Monkey*, where its making was driving me crazy but was also calming me down, as if—bouncing back and forth like a tennis ball—I didn't belong anywhere else but on an airplane. An airport, maybe.

TD: I like the idea of your children's "firsts" that you mentioned earlier happening on film. This pertains to the moral lesson of *Drop the Monkey*: don't confuse art and life (exactly what your works always do). Thinking about the consequences of life for art and vice versa, I am very interested in this kind of artmaking. The "play within the play" becomes life itself, mediated by art. This is something very different than *Hamlet* or Pirandello or postmodern fiction. It is closer to '60s and '70s live art: wanting life and art to converge around social questions, problems, actions. There is an ethic that you are putting forth couched in humor, play, and perversity.

GBN: I was shortcutting, sorry. I meant to refer to *Hamlet's* play within a play as described by Lacan, and I used it only as a kind of paradigm—an example for the way truth comes in the guise of fiction, as Lacan says. I found an even better story in Buster Keaton's biography: he describes a specific slapstick show he and his father were performing after they had a big fight at home. According to him, the blows and kicks were much more aggressive during that show. They broke each other's limbs. The stage allows an output of energies we don't let out in life; fiction becomes the means for truth to appear in a way no documentary can. But you are correct; erasing borders is always a noble task.

TD: The word "waste" also comes up in *Drop the Monkey*. It's as if by shooting *If Only...* and *Drop the Monkey* the way you have, you were trying not to be wasteful. Does waste have something to do with how you were thinking about your economic reality? It is a curious word that seems to recur in your work and in this interview.

GBN: Waste is economic reality and artistic means at once. It first occupied my mind as a problem when I started making videos. Waste is part of the moving-images dictionary more than that of any other art form, since cinema is so expensive yet so productive in making money. In cinema, time *really* is money. Only there can you find a certain "branch" defined by economical means—"low-budget cinema." You don't really hear of "low-budget sculptures" or "low-budget books." So, as one who started making movies with



*Berkeley's Island*, 1999, color video with sound. Total running time: 17 minutes.

less than a "low" budget, the economy of the means of production was an important aspect of my work. It still is. I consider it economical to use the light coming out of my refrigerator to light a scene, or to use the same tree for two different narratives. On the other hand, in *Drop the Monkey*, it is the access to money that complicates life. In the end, a clean economy is the privilege of the very few who can afford it.

TD: What I am noticing about *If Only...* (besides the irruption of your divorce papers—the end to a contract—and the possible contractual relationship you share with Mass MoCA and your fellow traveler, the pilot) is how the narrative logic seems to be determined by logistics/constraints, much as in *Drop the Monkey*. So I imagine shots being taken out of sequence and the employment of different camera people to get the shots you want. As in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (though obviously not as morbidly) the narrative is a kind of Mobius strip enfolding temporal moments that should be outside of it ("ahead" or "behind" in time) but are not. You are in the plane, seemingly, but see yourself driving in a car and stopping by the roadside to urinate. You are in the car driving in reverse maintaining a dialogue with a driver who appears to be driving forward.

GBN: The movie uses the idea of re-starting your life—a midlife crisis theme—and reflects on the possibility of slicing a narrative or looping it. By "narrative" I mean the movie itself, but also my life and the path traveled in the movie—"Midway upon the journey of our life," as Dante begins the *Divine Comedy*, which in his day was 35 years of age. He had such a crisis that he went down to hell. This is a story of authorship, of midlife crises. You go through something very personal that actually follows a well-known path. You slice up a narrative in an effort to gain control over your life, to feel that you yourself narrate it, that you authorize it,



only to realize you are a mere actor in someone else's script. That's the Mobius aspect of it. I was thinking about road movies and about famous traveling couples, like the knight and his squire, Quixote and Panza, Pooh and Piglet hunting the Woozle, Fogg and Passepartout, Dante and Virgil, Lear and the Fool. Most of these couples are made out of a master and his slave, but more profoundly they make for a discourse between a fool and a madman. Both of these aspects, formed through the characters of me and Joe, actually began pragmatically: in order to shoot a moving bicycle properly you need to mount the camera on a car. In order to shoot a car you need an airplane. Cinema is a funny thing. I liked this idea of waste. This made it possible for every "fictive" phase of the story (plane, car, bicycle) to also be the location for the "making of" the next phase. You shoot the plane scene while at the same time the actor is shooting the car below from the plane. I am not sure why I decided to start dropping books from the plane after quoting from them, but I did. Maybe in order to drop the quotation marks from the quotations.

TD: I'm thinking of madness. A kind of line of flight, a sense of travel, what madness and flight have to do with one another. People are made mad by displacement. Our world currently is mad for all of its orphaned (non-adopted) people.

GBN: No wonder so many travel narratives deal with madness. In *King Lear* you see it clearly, the non-adopted and dejected—Lear and Cordelia, but also their shadow images in Gloucester and Edgar—wandering and going mad, wandering and acting the fool.

TD: Rhyme, the function of rhyme, for me has to do with storytelling. How culture gets passed down or translated. In a way, you are recognizing yourself through these given cultural forms, both a frightening and exciting process. To know that you are cut from the same cloth as generations of people. That life is an iteration. Rhyme is a way of winking at your viewer. In *Second Nature* it is like a tic—an odd compulsion that the trainers can't account for, but put up with because they are in your employ. How, in an age of globalization, of massive displacement of people through social processes and bad economics, do we account for transition/travel? Through our own personal displacements (traumas, losses) we come to identify with other displaced conditions. Madness erupts in your haircut—you left your hair only partially cut for what must have been weeks. It's the madness of travel, or of being nowhere or wanting to be somewhere else. *If Only...* is about madness too. The car moving backward and forward at the same time, things—quotations—falling from the sky. There is a magical reality about how language comes to you. The path you travel in *If Only...* is labyrinthine. One of madness and magic. A space of "radical closure" as Jalal Toufic says. In a way, you are inventing a cinematic temporality that makes one

very aware of technique and production, and which draws on constraint as a resource rather than a lack. Speaking of grand narratives, it is as if you are miniaturizing the epic. Boiling it down. Pressurizing it. Then again, storytelling has always been a matter of making up stuff as you go on. And wandering. Rhyme, too. A form of movement within constraint.

GBN: I like your call. Earlier videos were more about lack, I guess, and new ones are about constraints, and constraints that can come from access rather than lack. In terms of artistic practice, nothing good can come from complete freedom. You need rules to play with and break. The best example I can think of comes from soccer—the quarterfinals between Argentina and England in '86 when Maradona scored two of the most famous goals in history. One was probably the most brilliant goal in soccer history according to the rules of the game—he dribbled past six of England's players—and the other was scored *outside* of the rules of the game, with his hand.

TD: Speaking of constraints, could you talk more about how you were constrained during the production of *Second Nature*, and *If Only...*? How in *Second Nature* did you come to work with animal trainers? How in *If Only...* with the pilot, Joe?

GBN: In *Second Nature*, after a long time, I made a piece that did not involve my children. Now, the problem was that I could not think of how to work with actors. So I gave up on people and worked with animals. Somehow the idea of a fable appealed to me for its pedagogic aspect, and anyway, animals are closer to children than actors are. My next thought was that it would be interesting to work with animals in the film industry. That decision brought people, the trainers, into the movie through the back door. The idea of training is a main theme in the video. I read Aesop's fable of the fox and the crow as a story about training. It even involves food as enticement. So the fox was training the crow, the trainers were training the animals, and the director was training the trainers—to act *Godot*, for example. Why *Godot*? Because the set requirements are the same for both the play and the fable—two figures next to a solitary tree—and I chose from Beckett specific lines that could relate to the situation of the animals. One thing that interested me regarding fables is that they are like instructions for life. Usually they teach that someone should not be what one's nature doesn't allow him to be. If you were born a frog or a slave then you should not try to become an ox or a master. I read into that a will to keep a certain strata at a certain level, as if human hierarchies are neutral. This is not so different from what Roland Barthes called "mythologies." A fable is a fiction given to you as a tool to use in life. As such it requires a clear separation between life and its representation. For me, the real lesson might be that you cannot separate narratives from



life, fiction from documentary, and that when you do create these separations, it is usually done in order to create power structures.

*If Only...* was commissioned by MASS MoCA, and I wanted to involve the museum's director, Joe Thompson, since I knew Joe flew his own plane. I took it as an opportunity to make an airplane movie, which later evolved into a road movie. Of course there was the idea of integrating the terms of engagement of the piece into the movie (something that became more clear in *Drop the Monkey*) by writing the dialogue between Joe and me, if that could be meant as constraint. But the bigger constraint was to make the most personal story using only other people's words, quoting literature, to give the feeling of walking a familiar path. Eventually it became a movie so different in its making from *Drop the Monkey*, also shot around the same time, that I really liked the contrast. *If Only...* was based on five critical shooting days and the making of *Drop the Monkey* lasted a year, with no separation between the time it was written and shot.

At the time of *Drop the Monkey* I was living in Tel Aviv and my girlfriend was living in Berlin. I decided to use that commission as means to see her every once in a while and create a movie that should talk about the proper or improper use of art. The constraints were quite unique, erasing the border between my life and the piece I was working on. It started with the artistic constraint that I was not allowed to edit the movie (this made it necessary to fly back and forth between Berlin and Tel Aviv with the camera and the tape to shoot a phone conversation between the two cities, and was supposed to allow me, by the way, to cultivate my relationship with my girlfriend). In the movie you eventually learn that because of the movie itself the girl actually left me—she felt I was trapping her—the movie contract was hiding another silent contract that was supposed to keep her by my side for at least a year until I finished it. This gave the movie the structure of a fable, or more precisely a parable about falling into one's own trap. Being bound by the contract, I still had to fly back and forth to finish my movie although the initial reason for wanting to do so was gone.

TD: There is something playful about all this, but I suspect also that you are pointing to a logic of contemporary life and art and your own life. If all of your works are allegories, your newer works seem to allegorize the foolishness of our eventfulness (you are, after all, searching for adventure, much like Pooh and Piglet, or Saint-Exupéry's little prince, or Quixote and Panza). Within a global economy, things magically drop out of the sky at us (books, divorce papers, butterfly nets) and seem to have an extra-human logic. This logic was once assigned to God but is now secularized as representative of our alienation from the things we make. There is a phantom objectivity about things

recalling Marxist "reification:" the sense that through surplus value, things take on a life of their own.

GBN: I was thinking of Benjamin's notion of "Quotations without a quotation mark" (here I go breaking from it) when I dropped those books from the airplane. It was about the use of the texts I was quoting, and how to reveal that use, if at all. But it is not so far from what you suggest, since Benjamin himself equates the quotation mark with a surplus value and authority added by it to the text. Actually, I tried to deal more directly with the ideas you mentioned in *I'd Give It to You if I Could but I Borrowed it*. It deals with objects and the surplus value they acquire as readymade objects in a museum. Useful objects that have been kidnapped, have lost their use value and gained exchange value and a lot of surplus value. These are readymade sculptures made out of bicycle parts (Duchamp's bicycle wheel, Picasso's bull head). The movie recorded the process in which the children and I were giving them back their use-value by combining them to form one fully functional bicycle again, which we later used for a trip in the park.

TD: Nods to existentialist literature or philosophy seem to play a significant part—as though we are fulfilling the prophecies of Sartre (the street sign in the conclusion of *If Only...*) or Beckett (whereof the characters cannot complete anything, their destinies being indefinitely deferred). Once again, I think of Eliot's Prufrock in *Drop the Monkey*—a figure of indecision, mid-life crisis, regret. One more literary figure embodying the hapless character of everyday life. The anachronism of your language (the rhyme speech) brings us back to a time of journeymen or pilgrims. Chaucer and Boccaccio both come to mind. Are we returning to a similar moment in history?

GBN: I am not a historian so how should I know? Perhaps the question should be, "are we returning at all?" Do you really believe such returns are possible? If so, whose? Nietzsche's? Maybe Marx's return? It is not easy to believe in historical progress, but what should we choose as our new conception of historical time? There are repetitions, there are loops, and there are Mobius strips. Which one? I don't know. But it is not really an anachronism, because I use these means to talk about my present.



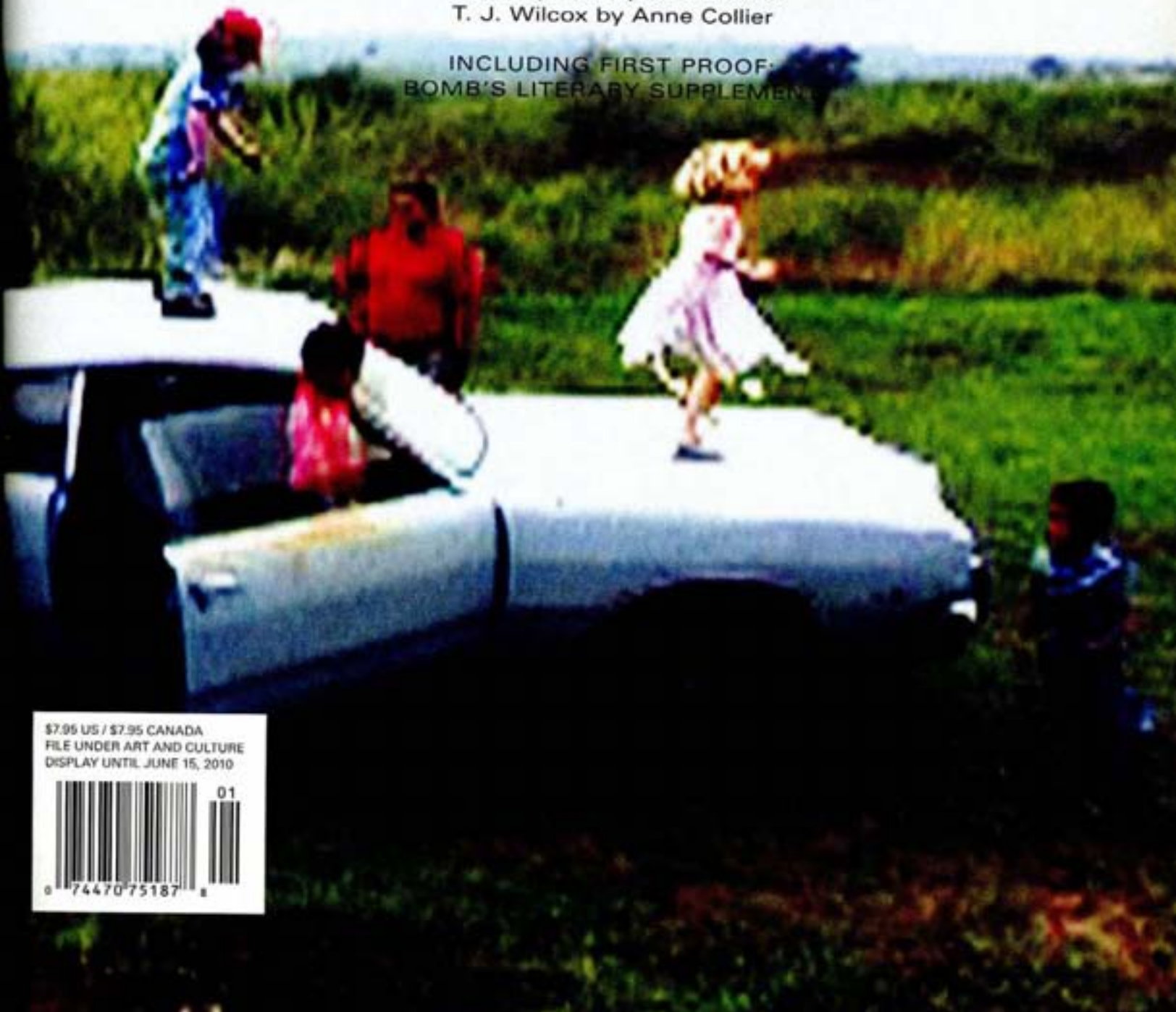
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