

HAPPENING JUST

NORTH OF DOWNTOWN

UP CENTRE STREET

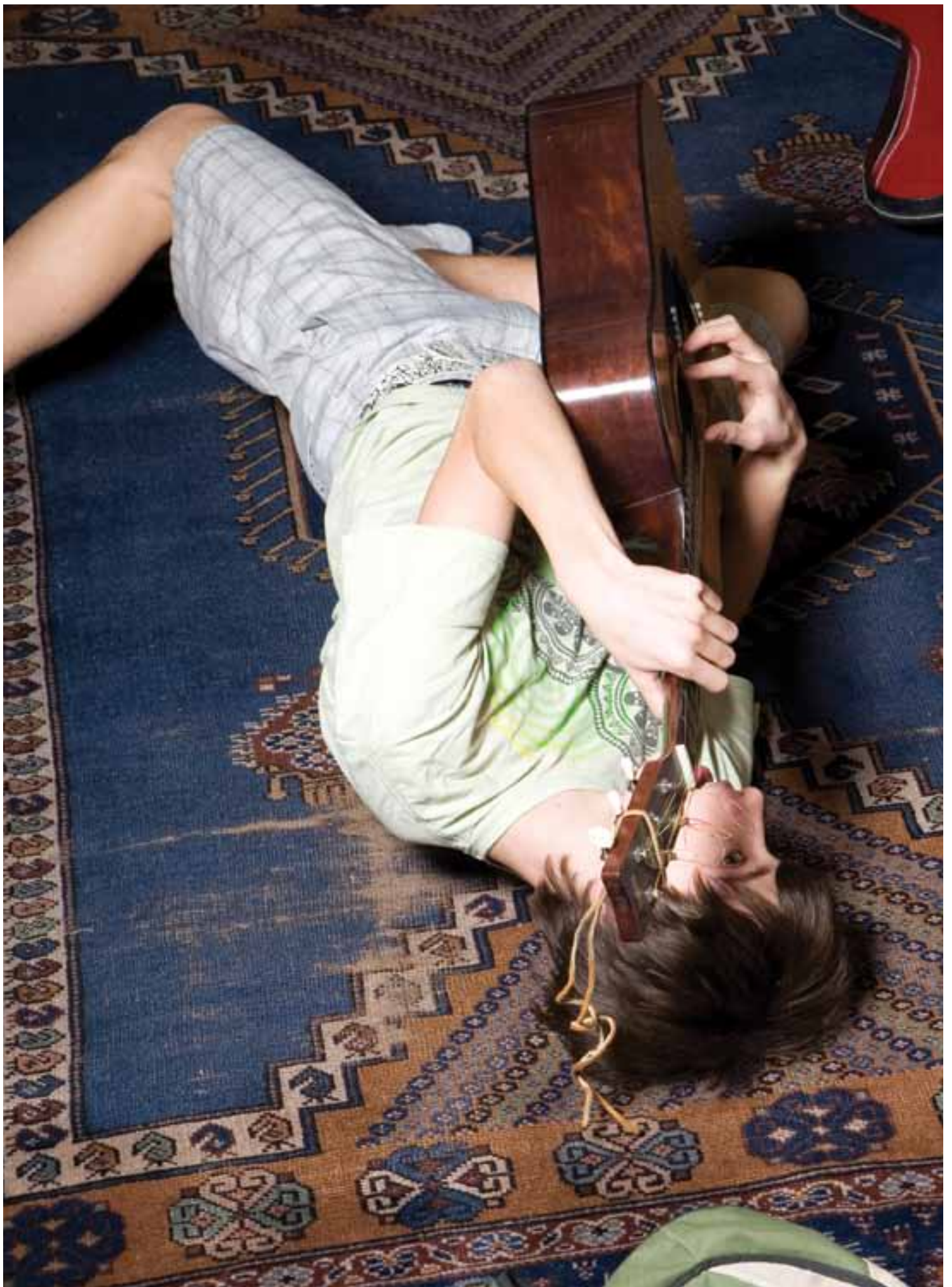
**RECONNAISSANCE AND RECONFIGURATION
IN *IMAGINARY ORDINARY'S* COMMUNITY-MAPPING PROJECT**

In his 1961 article “Happenings in the New York Scene,” Allan Kaprow attempted to clarify the purpose of the confusing range of performances that were becoming known as the “Happenings.” Often thought of as spontaneous and chaotic affairs, Kaprow admitted that the Happenings’ “form [was] open-ended and fluid,” but he hoped to make clear that the absence of distinct formal boundaries did not mean that the artform also lacked a more pointed rationale. Articulating the goals of the practice, Kaprow noted that “nothing obvious is sought and therefore nothing is won, except the certainty of a number of occurrences to which we are more than normally attentive” (16–17). To Kaprow, the Happenings offered an experiential paradigm that permitted the opportunity for the concentration of one’s attention. Focusing upon the everyday world and customary social practice, the Happenings re-enacted and re-cast the familiar in a new frame, briefly bracketing off an experience to yield a heightened awareness of the commonplace.

Situated within Calgary, one of Canada’s fastest growing urban centres, the community-mapping project *Imaginary Ordinary* facilitated just this sort of heightened attention. Suffering from a developmental sprawl enabled by a dearth



RACHAM WEARS
SWEAT PANTS TO THE GYM





TYLER STILL

LOVES POKEMON, EVEN THOUGH

HIS FRIENDS DON'T

of natural boundaries and an impoverished view of urban planning, the geographical footprint of Calgary spreads as a bewildering proliferation of “new communities” that perpetually redraws the map of the metropolitan area. Instead of looking towards the ever-shifting edges of the city, the project concentrated upon the city’s centre and framed the communities of Crescent Heights, Regal Terrace and Renfrew as an extended area of investigation. Inviting its neighbours to explore both the physical terrain and the social practices that together constitute the project’s imagined community, *Imaginary Ordinary* offered a range of activities that were simple invitations to re-consider the familiar and the commonplace.

Located north of the city’s downtown core of petro-wealth bolstered corporate office-towers, posh boutiques and high-rise condominium complexes, *Imaginary Ordinary*’s theatre of operations was not a popular cultural destination, but a well-established residential sector featuring small independent businesses and tree-lined streets. Straddling Calgary’s North Western and North Eastern quadrants (as distinguished by the bisecting roadway, Centre Street North) these communities are officially bound by the mass-transportation thoroughfares Deerfoot Trail to the east and by the Trans-Canada Highway (known as 16th Avenue North as it passes through Calgary) to the north. To the south the communities are aligned along the ridge of an escarpment that overlooks Calgary’s downtown, while the western most community, Crescent Heights, bleeds into the relatively affluent enclave of Rosedale. Neither prosperous nor impoverished, the communities have historically been home to successive waves of immigrants and continues to be home for many New Canadians that resist suburban ghettoization at the edges of the city.

I describe the area with this familiarity because I am one of its citizens. While I try to be factual, I yearn to be more persuasive. I live in this area because of its character. Rather than thinking of character as a nostalgic trace that privileges a specific history or a distinct architectural style, character here is something that sets the area apart and as distinct from other areas. Character exists as the aggregate of qualities, attitudes and perspectives evident in both the physical aspects of the community and the way that its inhabitants live their lives. In a city that has gotten too big, too quickly, this constellation of communities has a livability that has been imperiled by irresponsible and profit-driven development. Because of their proximity to the city’s core and the population’s reluctance to invest in meaningful urban planning, Renfrew, Regal Terrace and Crescent Heights are areas primed for a type of urban “renewal” that threatens the very character that has made them communities worth living in. These specific aspects of character are what *Imaginary Ordinary* proposed to explore.

IMAGINARY ORDINARY

Imaginary Ordinary’s base of operations was located on the east side of Calgary’s Centre Street North, in the Tigerstedt Block (established 1932), a one-storey

commercial building that once housed a string of independent businesses. When *Imaginary Ordinary* took up its temporary residency, the building had a one third occupancy rate. It was home to the popular neighbourhood pub, The Studio Café. The street-level storefront space (once the pet groomer, The Dapper Dog or was it Mr. Cappuccino, the outlet for all things espresso?) required extensive renovations that included the installation of a series of trays within the rafters to catch rainwater. Yet, even as this work was nearing completion, the property management company attempted to renege on its prior negotiated rental rate and thought that they should charge some \$25 /sq. ft. for such a prime location. To those of us who had lived in the community for years and witnessed a succession of businesses struggle, fail and disappear, the alleged “prime-ness” of the location came as some surprise.

When this economic dispute was resolved, *Imaginary Ordinary* opened its doors to its neighbours. The inaugural party featured a broad range of age groups from the under-ten set to the senior ranks, with the largest contingent being aged twenty to forty. Accommodating a crowd of eighty or so visitors, the space featured a large circular coffee-table that served as a prime site for chat. Re-acquainting with long-time friends or finally meeting those seen a dozen times throughout the community, the event differed from the see-and-be-seeness of gallery or exhibition openings. Instead there was an air of expectation and peeked interest as people discussed what might be in store for the community. Rather than offering spectacles and entertainments that radically confronted the community, the party established dialogue as an important aspect of community awareness and initiated the discussion of what possibilities existed within this shared community. Intimating the off-site investigations that would soon unfold and establishing the site as an assembly point for shared experience and the sharing of experience, the inviting and comfortable milieu reminded us of the importance of the familiar and the commonplace.

RECONNAISSANCE & RECONFIGURATION

To situate the ordinary and often overlooked aspects of the community within a state of heightened attention, *Imaginary Ordinary* offered a “mapping” process. Spanning from reconnaissance to reconfiguration, mapping requires the use of a number of differing skill sets that contravene our habitual responses to the world around us. To initiate this changed perspective, the project invited participants to practice a more attentive and responsive attitude to familiar places and situations. Utilizing sustained observation, careful measurement and studious data collection, the participants gathered information and experiences. While the experiential value of these reconnaissance engagements was a vital aspect of *Imaginary Ordinary*, the project also proposed to make these ephemeral and transient encounters more permanent, durable and sharable. To explore this possibility, the project engaged cartographic reconfiguration, where the data and knowledge of experience could



RENAY READS

"END OF THE WORLD" FICTION

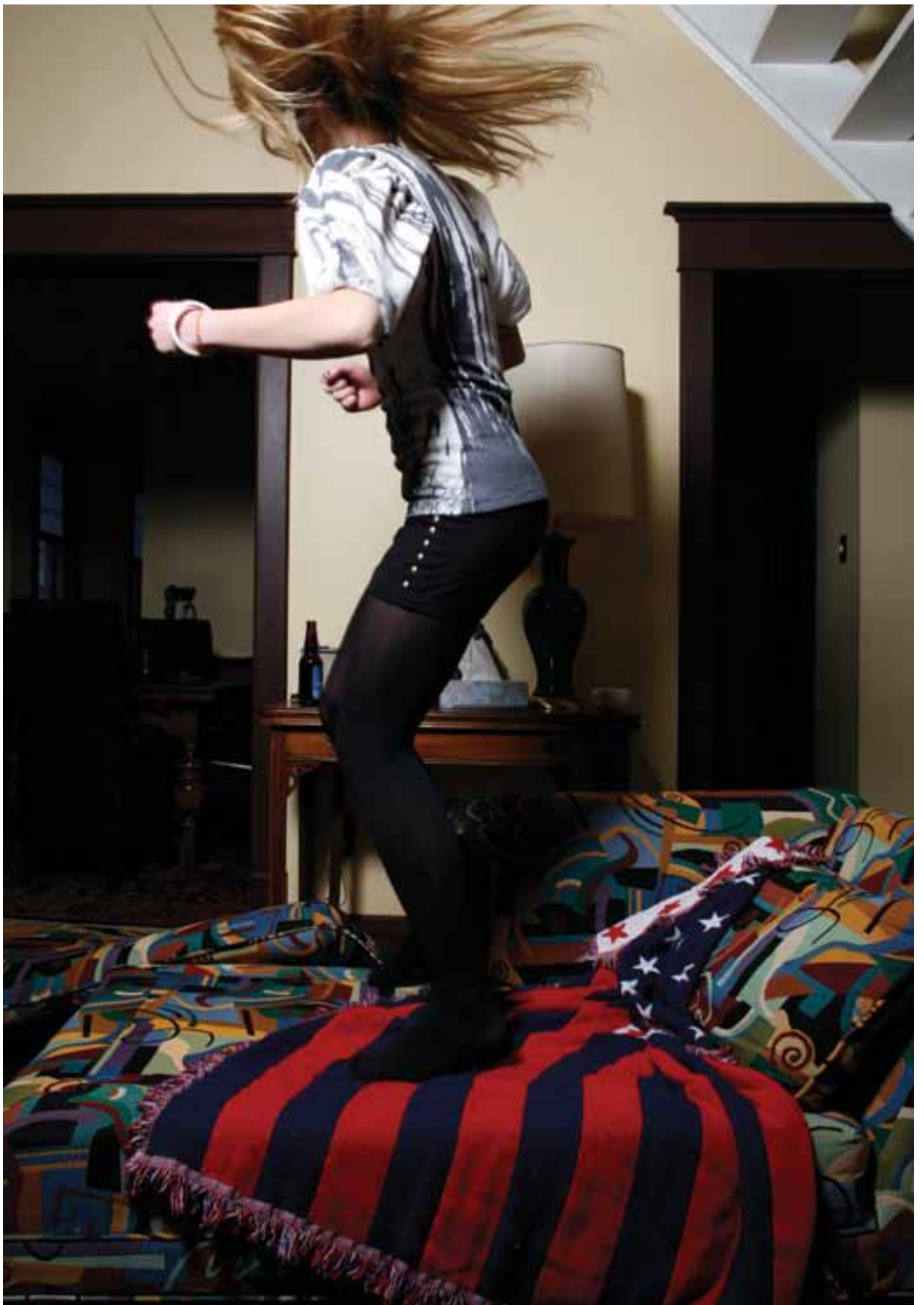
NICK'S FIRST CAR WAS A BLACK

PONTIAC TRANS AM

be translated, categorized and archived so that it was retrievable by, and legible to, subsequent participants. Displayed within the physical site and throughout the temporal duration of *Imaginary Ordinary* these documents provided intriguing examples of the participants' attention – what they were attentive to, how they were attentive, and demonstrating how we, too, might be attentive to the possibilities often overlooked within our community.

To ascertain what had gone unnoticed and un-remarked throughout the community's physical terrain, the project offered such reconnaissance experiences as its weekly "Urban Wanderers" nights. Meandering as a group through both familiar streets and less consciously visited spaces such as back alleys and parking lots, the wanderers were invited to share memories and recollections provoked by the different locations. As the group unpredictably advanced on foot through the unfamiliar familiar, the intriguing detritus of urban life repeatedly arrested their attention. Obscure fragments of refuse and curious bits of dis-used matter were considered "specimens" of the community and were collected and their locations charted. Upon returning from the off-site excursion, the participants were introduced to methods for organizing and re-presenting their accumulated community samplings. Analyzing the different relationships and resonances suggested by the amassed material, the participants determined an organizing principle. Selecting which collected materials best represented the evening's experience and encountered terrain, the participant organized those remnants that merited preservation upon pre-printed display card templates. Framed and exhibited on the walls of the *Imaginary Ordinary* site, these collections combined to form an unexpected and imaginative map of the community.

In addition to group undertakings like the Urban Wanderers events, the project also facilitated more individual engagements. Organized like a lending library, *Imaginary Ordinary* provided a series of bright-yellow "kits," each one containing the necessities for a specific creative investigation of the community. If an individual desired a leisurely and sedentary experience, they might choose the kit designed to enable the drawing of the clouds. Finding a suitable vantage point, the participant could observe Calgary's ever-changing cloud formations and intuitively translate these into unexpected associative imagery. Another participant might have long been bothered by areas of urban space in need of a greater variety of foliage; to rectify this observed problem, they could select the kit containing all that was needed to plant a "guerrilla" flower garden. If one had always admired a particular person in the community and long wished for an opportunity to engage that person in conversation, then the "interview yer neighbour" kit could be chosen. Armed with a stack of suggested questions and a pad for recording the subject's responses, the kit provided the simple, but accessible means to start a conversation and learn about the perspectives and the experiences of the people that make-up the community.



A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt with a dark pattern and black leggings, is performing a backbend on a bed. She is leaning far back, with her hands reaching towards her feet. The bed has a colorful, abstract patterned blanket and a red and blue striped blanket. In the background, there is a wooden nightstand with a lamp, a bottle, and a glass. A dog is lying on the nightstand. The room has a dark wood headboard and a doorway leading to another room.

DIMA'S GRANDMOTHER

PRACTICES RACHMANINOFF

IN THE MORNINGS

YOLANDA FIXES BIKES

IN HER GARAGE



DISTRACTION

I had attended the opening party with my life partner, Linda, who secured one of the pre-printed display cards. Immediately she decided to document the sidewalk chalk drawings of children that we always admire on our evening walks. I, however, was attracted to a different sort of spontaneous creativity and counter-creativity. As civic law uses the threat of fines to force property owners to promptly remove or paint-over graffiti, I thought I might document the traces of this action and re-action by photographing the oddly-shaped patches of effacing colours that indexed tagging and its obliteration. Despite our initial enthusiasm for these projects, we soon realized that something happening much closer to home would divert our attention.

Across the back alley from where we live, a new housing development was beginning. Where a modest rental bungalow had once stood, a three-storey fourplex was being built. As neighbours directly affected by this structure, we had attempted to be engaged within the planning and development approval process, but the City of Calgary let us down by providing misleading information and no forum for public consultation. Faced with a development project that seemed to contravene the requirements of its initial permit, we soon lost sight of our community-mapping projects and focused upon developing strategies to rally community-dissent against the contentious development that we were now calling, the “Monstrosity.”

As avid walkers, we still traversed Renfrew, Regal Terrace and Crescent Heights nightly. Moving throughout our extended neighbourhood, we would often admire the effort and ingenuity of the temporary images that children inscribed upon the walkways. One that stands out, though, was a forty-foot long (12 metres) drawing diagramming the (3 hour) drive between Calgary and Edmonton. Since our evening strolls had become heated strategizing sessions where we debated our next move in our on-going battle against the Monstrosity, we forgot to bring our camera and could not document this amazing work. The next day it rained and only traces of the drawing remained.

SHARED SPACE / SHARING SPACE

The *Imaginary Ordinary* site itself also provided a space to learn about the perspectives and experiences of the people living in the neighbourhood. Framing common interests and unexpected skills, the project drew attention to the variety and the vitality of experience that might have been overlooked in the community. On several occasions the project invited its community to “Ask an Expert,” where members of the community offered their expertise and insights to anyone wanting answers. After all, who hasn’t wondered what it takes to be an expert or gone through the mental litany of his or her own skills, interests and fascinations to access whether their knowledge base would reach “expert” status. The project,

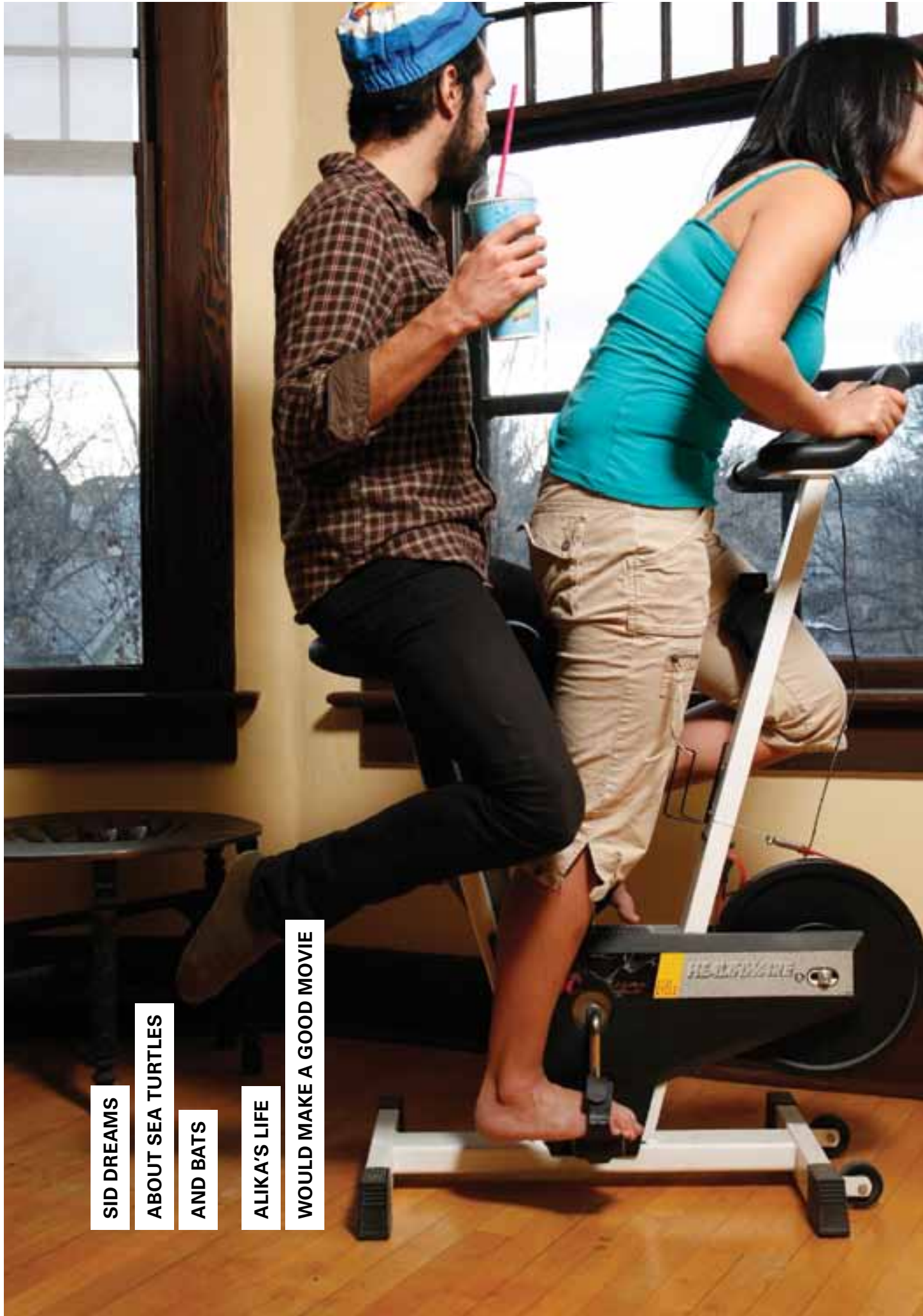
SID DREAMS

ABOUT SEA TURTLES

AND BATS

ALIKA'S LIFE

WOULD MAKE A GOOD MOVIE



though, provided an opportunity to see an expert in action as they bravely fielded questions and generously dispensed advice. Turning over the floor to the community's youngest residents for "Kids Talk Sharks," the project allowed local youths to show how much they knew about a specialized branch of knowledge. On another afternoon, the site provided the opportunity to learn the intricacies of tap-dancing from a qualified instructor and have a chance to practice participants steps in a supportive environment of friends and neighbours. Implicit in such offerings was *Imaginary Ordinary's* invitation to explore the expertise and the potential that are the everyday attributes of the community. By July our efforts to halt the development of the Monstrosity finally yielded building inspections that resulted in a stop-work order being issued. It was then that I wondered if Linda and I should offer our newly-developed expertise in dealing with Calgary's development approval system to the community.

ART & LIFE

Like the Happening before it, *Imaginary Ordinary* was designed for a temporary life, destined to disappear and be judged by the quality of the memories it left behind. My memories of the project include the 19 sketches of dogs that Mia Rushton encountered one day at Rotary Park and the 14 shiny objects collected by Fallan and Greg that would make any crow envious. I also remember the story of the two young girls who borrowed the filmmaking kit. Instead of following the script provided, they spent an hour videographing each other as they wandered through Crescent Heights, generally acting silly and spontaneously re-scripting the anticipated activity. But here is the perfect example of an everyday occurrence that the project invites us to be attentive to; everyone has wandered aimlessly and acted silly, especially as a youth, but the camera and video documentary evidence preserves this everyday experience and asks us to be attentive to it. Thinking about its implications, these young girls' subversion of the kit's purpose is a creative response that interjects "art" into common everyday life.

Like the Happenings, *Imaginary Ordinary* used artistic and creative practices to draw attention to the everyday. Through a series of reconnaissance experiences and encounters, the project re-framed the familiar and the commonplace as subjects worthy of heightened awareness and close scrutiny. While the project might be suspicious of my association of its efforts with a once avant-garde, now securely canonical art practice, the project's continuing resonance stretches far beyond its immediate imagined community towards the field of art. Considering contemporary art's enthusiasm for the participatory appeasement of art and life, *Imaginary Ordinary* merits our close attention and this volume illustrates the project's innovative efforts. Underscoring the relation of life and art, *Imaginary Ordinary* privileged neither option but instead offered opportunities to experience how art and life, when attentively participated in, may be mutually enriching.

A close-up photograph of a person eating cereal. The person is holding a white spoon with cereal and milk, and a stream of milk is dripping from the spoon into a red bowl below. The person is wearing a brown t-shirt with a graphic. The bowl is on a colorful, patterned placemat. The background is dark.

IT'S 30 STEPS

FROM MATTHEW'S HOUSE TO

THE MAILBOX

POST IMAGINARY

It would not be a Calgary story without an up-date on developmental issues. Since winding-up operations, the Tigerstedt Block has seen some changes and will apparently see more. The Studio Café is gone, replaced by the Tropical Corner, a “coffee lounge.” The *Imaginary Ordinary* space has been taken over by a vacuum repair outlet. The façade of the block currently features a large-scale advertisement illustrating the site’s future development. It seems as if it will be a mixed commercial / retail / residential complex, a type of development that signifies the imminent gentrification that has eroded the character of other communities in Calgary. Calgarians will be able to imagine the boutique and condominium template that pre-figured the decline-through-revitalization paradox that blighted Mission, Lower Mount Royal and Kensington in the past.

The development blight upon my own personal view of the sky also signals foreboding changes in the offing. The aforementioned Monstrosity, languished in a “stop-work” induced stupor for several months as city officials negotiated with the developer about possible revisions – the inspectors seems to have revealed some significant discrepancies between the permitted development and the as-built structure. To inform our neighbours about the situation, Linda and I spent many hours canvassing the community. We gathered 100 signatures for a letter of “registered complaint,” with no less than 95% of those we contacted agreeing to sign. Widespread community dissent, though, made little impact – the city recently issued a new permit for the Monstrosity. Despite my continuing attention to this issue, and my regret at failing to fulfill my own envisioned community-mapping project, I am glad for the distraction of recounting *Imaginary Ordinary’s* creative interventions into my community.

RICHARD SMOLINSKI

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