PAINTING IN TONGUES
The brush-stroke language of
BEN REEVES
Serious PLAY
From Halifax to Brooklyn
Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg by Ray Cronin

"The artist is in the privileged position of navigating between craft and concept." — Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg
Imagine this: two people watching television, a large paper bag on the floor between them. The television set casts its light upon them dimly. There is not enough light to show us exactly what they are doing, just enough to reveal the constant activity of their fingers: they roll material between their hands, pinching and poking, and then flick the resulting small objects expertly into the bag. “Finger!” they jointly exclaim, while one fumbles for the remote to freeze Jack Black’s middle finger in mid-flip, recording the moment. Then it’s back to quiet activity. The movie rolls on, as do their palms. To roll, to pinch, to poke, to flick, to flip, to collect...it’s a list of activities reminiscent of Richard Serra’s conceptual projects. In fact, Serra’s Verb List Compilation; Actions to Relate to Oneself (1967–68) begins with “to roll,” reaches its midpoint with “to gather” and ends with “to continue.” In between are all the activities Serra can think of that are sculptural or pertain to sculpture, a kind of definition through doing. So what are these two people doing?

My description is fictional, of course, but it refers to something actual: two works by Chris Hanson and Hendrika Sonnenberg, Bag of Beans and Finger. Bag of Beans consists of representations of red kidney beans moulded out of Sculpey, a modelling compound that is fixed when baked in an oven. Bag of Beans is an unfinished project; the artists have completed three full bags with no end in sight. Finger, also a continuing piece, is a video compilation of actors gesturing with their middle fingers (flipping the bird) in movies that Hanson and Sonnenberg watched as they modelled their Sculpey beans.

So what are they doing? They’re making art. Through repetitive, incessant labour, these two artists are inscribing meaning into what can be the most meaningless of human activities.

One of the tenets of art dogma in the 1980s and 1990s (when Chris and Hendrika were in art school) was that the idea, the concept, was paramount: artists didn’t have to make their own work, in fact they were often discouraged from doing so. Why make things when you could have them made? Why wallow in retrograde notions of making and doing? It’s tiresome. And dirty. And unforgiving—poor craft exposes many a weak idea. So why take the risk? Hire some skill. Many artists did and still do, and many make very good work this way. But there is still something compelling about making good works by hand. Making is fundamentally different from having something made, and not all artists are able to see their ideas successfully realized by others. And what’s wrong with work anyway? Ironically, the theories of authorship and aesthetics that helped make doing it yourself fashionable in the last decades of the 20th century were delivered in textual form. The author was killed by writers.

Chris Hanson is from Montreal, while Hendrika Sonnenberg is from Toronto. They received their undergraduate degrees in Halifax at NSCAD, and completed master’s degrees in Chicago (at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in Son-
nenberg's case, and the University of Illinois in Hanson's). They now live and work in Brooklyn, New York. Hanson and Sonnenberg work collaboratively, developing ideas in tandem and working them out together. They negotiate constantly between themselves, arriving at a joint position with each project and working towards a common goal: there are no minority reports in their oeuvre. Their practice involves many simultaneous activities: there are beans and fingers to be sure, but also hockey fights, fruit bowls, polystyrene sculptures, buckets and more. Negotiation is central to their practice, but they do not fetishize either labour or their materials. They may spend hundreds if not thousands of hours labouring, but this time is spent with prosaic, even mundane materials: Sculpey, polystyrene foam, plaster, cardboard, discarded street signs.

Nor are they fixed on one medium: they are sculptors in that they are constantly articulating ideas in three dimensions, but they do not always choose to display their work as objects in space: the fruit-bowl works, for instance, are photographs, as are the Agreement Room works.

Nevertheless, it is as makers of objects that Hanson and Sonnenberg most fully realize their ideas. Their 1:1, full-scale representations of objects such as speakers, microphones, bicycles and
other quotidian items in blue and green polystyrene foam, for instance, are among the most dynamic and compelling sculptures you'll see anywhere. Like their contemporaries in Halifax—Thierry Delva, Colleen Wolstenholme and Greg Forrest—and other artists with NSCAD connections, such as David Diviney and Kevin Yates, they mine the possibilities inherent in seemingly banal objects, presenting complex, layered ideas in the guise of the ordinary.

Or sometimes the not-so-ordinary: their work Scoreboard (2004) is a full-scale, one-sided version of a large scoreboard that crashed to the ice in Buffalo's Marine Midland Arena in 1996. What the piece shares with their other works in polystyrene is its relation to spectacle, to large gatherings of strangers and the rituals and conventions that keep things under some sort of control. For Hanson and Sonnenberg, public gatherings serve as starting points: press conferences, parties and the contested public spaces of sidewalks and parks all play a role in their thinking. Take their four works entitled Fence. These are full-scale replicas of sections of chain-link fencing, that ubiquitous urban fixture that springs up to indicate construction, renovation or some other change to the urban environment. How many of us haven't felt a moment of anger when faced with a sidewalk obstructed by this sort of fencing and a sign instructing pedestrians to "use other side"? Just a petty annoyance, to be sure, but the sum of too many petty annoyances is often rage, isn't it? Hanson and Sonnenberg's fences, meticulously carved from polystyrene foam, are so self-evidently fragile that one feels as if the merest breath could knock them over, that the slightest touch will damage them, that one could shred them into bits in seconds. Faced with a symbol of control, we must exercise self-control. The fences are more than fragile; they are also beautiful: the workmanship is breathtaking, the detail is fascinating and the little glitches and quirks that mark them as handmade are irresistible. They are a pleasure to look at—interesting because beauty and pleasure were also taboo in Hanson and Sonnenberg's student days, eschewed as just two more tricks to seduce the viewer.

The duo's collaborative practice and their insistence on focusing on the seemingly banal has resulted in comparisons with the Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss, but other artists come to mind too. I've mentioned Thierry Delva, Colleen Wolstenholme and Greg Forrest, but one could also talk about Tom Friedman, Wim Delvoye, Rodney Graham, Brian Jungen, Sarah Lucas and many others. These artists do not make versions of objects per se, but, rather, create objects that embody ideas, ideas that are also carried in their works' ostensible subject matter. Rodney Graham's sterling-silver screen door isn't interesting just for its material qualities, but because it evokes the screen door at Graceland. Brian Jungen's conflation of First Nations imagery and mass-produced objects such as sneakers, plastic lawn chairs and golf bags is what gives his practice its punch, and Sarah Lucas's oversized bronze renditions of household knick-knacks work because her shifts in scale and context reorient her material's weighted history and conventions.

There is nothing easy about Hanson and Sonnenberg's work, despite the seeming familiarity of their ideas. ("Successful ideas generally have the appearance of simplicity because they seem inevitable," wrote Sol LeWitt in 1967. He was right.) But of course it's not easy to shift contexts, to think outside of our experience. Context is content for Hanson and Sonnenberg, and the subjects they choose for the communication of their ideas are all part of the larger context of our shared culture. What does it say about our society when the closest thing we have to shared ideas are the symbols and rituals of popular culture? It's a far cry from the ideals of capital-A art as expressed in centuries past. Is what Clement Greenberg called kitsch the last common ground? Perhaps, but through their work Hanson and Sonnenberg turn the banal into the thoughtful. They work their way out of the dilemma of what to do with, as Elvis Costello has it, all the "useless beauty" of our cliché-ridden popular culture. Postmodern-day alchemists, they turn dross into gold.