In "Structures and Strictures," Robert Ladislas Derr takes us back to the early 70s,* with simple, repetitive and non-spectacular actions. We're near the humble purism of ground zero again, with the artist stripping the performance down to its essential elements. The time seems right. But it's not that simple...

The difference is that Derr—instead of offering simple documentation, as did his artistic antecedents—pulls the action through the machine of formal investigation in video and photography. The seriality and juxtaposition of the end product reinforces the banality of his original performance, while drawing from it unexpected beauty. Sometimes, the
individual frames of the video function in sequence as the pixels of a larger geometric abstraction. Consistently, the photographic assemblage becomes through the process something else, increasingly deliberate and more and more lovely.

He takes his cue from Erwin Wurm, who, in his words, "uses video to go beyond a two-dimensional representation of real time to activate the gallery space for the viewer as a tautologically spatial experience."

Each step, from action to video and finally photograph involves a further level of detachment, as he reshapes the raw material of the previous into something increasingly aesthetically determined. This evolution from something-next-to-nothing—lacking in iconic stature and mainstream or even subcultural relevance—into rigorously focused subjectivity is for Derr an allegory of his own creative independence.

Conditioning the movements of his body are basic manmade and natural structures of no particular aesthetic grace—a sewer pipe, a wooden box, a tree, less ugly per se than manifestly undistinguished. Derr uses them (as would a minimalist) as the parameters of his tightly focused formal investigation. But further, they stand for him as delimitations of possibility, the psychogeographic constraints that reinforce the routines of everyday life.

Derr has chosen sites in and around Cincinnati, Ohio and Western Virginia. They are located in marginal spaces, typical of the non-scenic areas that one drives by, for example, in going to the supermarket. These are his Walden Ponds of self-reflection and -discovery.
In April, Derr's work will be featured in "Playing the City," curated by Matthias Ulrich at the Schirn Kunsthalle alongside works by Dara Friedman, Rirkrit Tiravanija, David Byrne, and Allan Kaprow. He will also be featured in ASPECT: The Chronicle of New Media Art, with commentary by Bill Arning, curator of MIT’s List Visual Arts Center.

-- Don Carroll

*Derr draws on the seeds laid by such artists as Vito Acconci, Erwin Wurm, William Anastasi, Dennis Oppenheim and Dan Graham. To underscore this connection, Derr includes Acconci, Anastasi, Oppenheim, Graham, Wurm in his video piece In Play (not in this exhibition), as his ping pong opponents.