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the art of travel

Forever engaged in the
"there" beyond the "here"

BY IAN CARR-HARRIS



"Well, in *our* country," said Alice, still panting a little, "you'd generally get to somewhere else—if you ran very fast for a long time as we've been doing."

"A slow sort of country!" said the Queen. "Now, *here*, you see, it takes all the running *you* can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

—Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There



ABOVE: The Canadian Pavilion, June 2001 Photo Jonathan Frantini Courtesy *Saturday Night*

LEFT: Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller *The Paradise Institute* (interior view) 2001 Photo Jonathan Frantini Courtesy *Saturday Night*

I like the weight of trains and the feel of that weight lifted into speed against the resistance of the rails. I like train stations the way I like public squares, as natural meeting places melting effortlessly into the streets of cities at the far reaches of my imagining. That is why I like carrying my own bags along the platform and up into the carriage. I like the fact that my friends can stand outside and remain with me to wave goodbye as I settle into my seat. And as the doors close and I feel track and train merge into motion, I can watch as buildings, then fields, roads, forests pass like living stage sets on either side.

For anyone curious about such things, and trains seem to provoke such curiosity, the relationship between travel and other experiences becomes a matter of interest. Since my major preoccupation tends to be how art functions and for whom, it is the connection between art and travel that comes to mind as my train pulls out from

Amsterdam Centraal this June morning on its way to Paris. This article, if that is not too grand a term for what amounts to some personal travel notes, is the measure of that journey.

I was quietly laughing my way through Nicholson Baker's *The Size of Thoughts* when a relatively large one snuck up on me. Reflecting on certain possibilities in the cliché "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like," it occurred to me that stepping onto this train was to step into a particularly positioned moment. I'm talking History. Because trains do not fly. They run. On steel, on the ground. Trains are the last great public marker of our inevitable mortality. Unlike cars, whose ethos is illusory control pushed to a disembodied panic speed, the train's implacable schedule releases us to the materiality of time and place. Unlike planes, and very much like Alice, however fast the train runs, it does not leave my "here." When I step out onto the platform at Paris Nord, I will be in a "here" whose connectedness over the last several



hours and hundreds of kilometres remains tactile and unbroken. As in a child's game, I can connect the dots, and this makes me neither a tourist nor a pilgrim, but a traveller. And, I want to insist, it makes for a significant way of looking at art. Now, I don't know much about art either. But I do know what I like as I rummage about discovering, retrospectively, reasons to think about it, connecting the dots that accrue, as it were. It's like picking flowers and finding a bouquet—or like travelling on a train and finding myself here.

Around this largish thought, then, I want to suggest a few contributing thoughtlets on how I see art functioning. In this regard, two works in particular are of interest: Janet Cardiff's *A Large Slow River* at Oakville Galleries' Gairloch Gardens, and Robin Collyer's *Yonge Street, Willowdale* from his series of four retouched colour photographs.

If you are not familiar with the general nature of Cardiff's work, this beguiling quote from the Oakville Galleries' spring newsletter may help: "Janet Cardiff will produce an audio walking tour that will guide visitors through Gairloch Gardens....Cardiff's reproduction and sequencing of life-like sounds plays with the visitor's senses, suggesting movements that do not occur, and people and things that are not there."

In *A Large Slow River*, Janet Cardiff intercepts our assumption that artworks are to be unravelled, read, or otherwise decoded and produced by us in a sort of eager quest for meaning. We are escorted, politely but firmly and somewhat brusquely, along a path that has already been travelled by Cardiff herself, and which we are now directed in following at her pace, in our time. As we struggle with this duality, we find ourselves drawn into a complex of memories from that time-before-us, now re-enacted not as a singular narrative—a story for our time—but as a series of fragments, or found experiences, whose contingent immediacy finds equivalence in the variance between Cardiff's path and ours.

In other words, her directions and memories open up a gap between her "here" and ours. We realize that, while of *this* here, they are not of this time, and that her narrative, so elliptically inscribed as to disassociate us from narrative itself, is from another place. Vital to Cardiff's project is our recognition that while her directions and stories are disassociated from our experience, the work has enrolled us as intimate companions and participants in what constitutes a parallel experience which is also a palimpsest, a superimposition, linking her with us. We *are* on that same path; we *are* following her directions as we skirt the landmarks she describes, both those that exist for *our* here and those that existed only in *her* here. And central to these links between her and us is that we inevitably stumble, get left behind, go astray and have to catch up to...what? To our here through hers, on a path which has always been plainly in sight, and whose destination was always already connected to where we began.

Walking through the garden with Cardiff's voice in my head, I'm unsure whether I'm tracing her path over mine or mine over hers. But standing in another here, at the Art Gallery of York University a year before, I'm quite sure that I'm where Robin Collyer has placed me: face to face with *Yonge Street, Willowdale*. The photograph is there, I am here. But like the artist, I too live here—in Toronto, and this is my town. So this "there" is also pretty well here, brought here, as a sign for what I know exists across town as something I can travel to, by streetcar and bus. And whether I live here or not, I know from the title that this image is of Yonge Street, Willowdale. A "there" that could be a "here" if I were to go *there*.

Fair enough, you might say, but after all this is what photographs can do. What Collyer has in effect done, however, takes a moment to register—like watching a photograph emerge in a developing tray. In the space between recognizing



LEFT AND OPPOSITE: Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller
Video stills from *The Paradise Institute* 2001 Courtesy Plug In Gallery/Walter Phillips Gallery

the photograph's reference to a locatable here, and recognizing that he has dislocated image from language—or, I am about to say, relocated image across language—my experience of *his* there becomes an experience of *my* here. Because, you see, there is no text, no language, no index in the billboards and sign-posts that continue, quite normally, to populate Collyer's *Yonge Street, Willowdale*. There is only the *form* of the signs, the street and the objects, and language has been displaced to a connecting link between myself and the image. The language *within* signs has been converted to the language of signs, and once again—as with Cardiff—we find ourselves on an oscillating plane, in a shift between the terrains of the viewer and the viewed. If Collyer's use of language seems at a polar opposite to Cardiff's, they come together here, at the point where Alice discovers that getting from here to there is—like travelling—a matter for the far reaches of an imagination firmly anchored in the “here.”

Meanwhile, remember that I'm on a train, and reflecting on how that experience represented a positioned moment. I believe I said I was talking History. I was going to say that while trains verify real space—in which time is a function of experience, and the realm of the traveller—air travel occupies a fictive transcendental space, where time is divorced from experience and we enter the realm of the tourist.

For the tourist, space and time are collapsed into a projected and even Platonic desire: sensation reduced to a checklist, an anticipation to be annulled, or crossed off. Increasingly, we have become inured to tourist time. Indeed, we have become tourists to ourselves. Perhaps this should come as no surprise, since modern life has always been premised on transcendental notions of revelation and progress. In any case, this minor historical illumination led me to the matter of art. These thoughts seemed to make

sense on the TGV as I jotted them down, comfortably accompanied by panoramic fields, stretched buildings and snapshot figures, because what had caught my eye was a preview text in the special issue of *Beaux Arts* magazine devoted to an exhibition I was thinking of seeing in Avignon. Specifically, and I quote: “Taken from the love stories of the late Middle Ages, such as the *Songe de Poliphilie* or those by Petrarch, ‘Beauty in Fabula’ is designed like a fable. It is structured like a long quest with many trials along the way: the visitor vacillates from inner turmoil and doubt to the pleasures of carnal delight and spiritual ecstasy.” Don't get me wrong. I'm as ready as anyone to enjoy carnal delights and spiritual ecstasy. But to me, a journey, a pilgrimage, a progress such as the one described has the closed quality of an entrapment. We're talking the difference between a miracle play and Shakespeare.

So, the first of my two thoughtlets related to art therefore has to do with the fact that it is not my experience that carnal delight and spiritual ecstasy—both of which I strongly endorse as central to art—can be choreographed as a narrative. Watching the Dutch and then the Belgian and French countryside pass by, I felt the gratification of surprise—delight and ecstasy, you might say—as minor and completely circumstantial epiphanies were stitched together by the implacable weave of the train's uneventful passage. There was a narrative, but one constructed by my own recognitions as the train—and I—together traced the here of what was already there. Just as my walk in the gardens with Janet Cardiff, or my apprehension of the Real while standing before Robin Collyer's photograph, provided a similar set of recognitions. As Gary Larson, the *Far Side* cartoonist, might have said, first the story, then the tale.

My second thought, a corollary, really, has to do with proximity—the need to touch and be touched. Janet Cardiff's



voice reaches us viscerally, even to the point of forcing us to suppress an urge to turn in her direction, to face her physical presence. And just as *A Large Slow River* uses language to connect her path through a landscape with ours, Robin Collyer employs the language-title *Yonge Street, Willowdale* as a linking index, returning a landscape stripped of language to a palpable form. In other words, we are led into both these works through felt experience. Like Saint Thomas, first the touch, then the embrace. No air kisses.

But in Venice, during a biennale, air kisses abound. I'm tempted to reflect on the rightness of this. Venice defines itself at the crossroads of historical decadence and modern tourism. Everyone else has long since picked up on the exquisite perfection of the site as a set wherein to situate the tragic comedy of desire. And, since Venice is the city of Casanova and Marco Polo, let alone of Thomas Mann, air kisses seem to suggest acknowledged limits and a healthy option.

It is, of course, the city of this year's "*Platea dell'umanita*"; part two, one might say, of Harald Szeemann's grand linkage

between the *then* of the twentieth century and the *now* of the new millennium. I'm here—in another June—to pursue those two thoughtlets of a year ago a little bit further through Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's work *The Paradise Institute*, shown here under the curatorial direction of Wayne Baerwaldt. Taking my cue from Venice itself, I'm interested in pursuing the linkage of time with that of place: in returning to Venice, I am in a place that connects Cardiff and Collyer across time—eight years, 1993 and 2001—through place, the same site—Canada's ambassador pavilion to the biennale. I want to reconsider Collyer's sculpture *Kiosk*, shown along with four similar works from the early 1990s in the Canadian pavilion that year by curator Philip Monk. In the process, we add *then* and *now* to here and there.

My notes tell me that the biennale of 1993 was directed by Achille Benito Oliva, the Italian art critic known for his invention of the term *Transavanguardia*. Benito Oliva's biennale carried the title "Cardinal Points of Art." Its theme, he explained, "is indicative of an overview of how contemporary art is the result of cultural nomadism." Writing in the



introduction to the catalogue of the current biennale, Harald Szeemann states, "We do not find ourselves facing new art revolutions...but in a climate of increasing interest in human behaviour, in human existence....Art today...searches for the dissolution of borders, which is the characteristic of the 'trend towards global artwork'....This however remains a utopia. Every art has its own laws, conditions, its own way of making use of space reception."

My point, if it doesn't seem too naked, is that the contest between Benito Oliva and Szeemann's differing positions reflects precisely the struggle with proximity that informed my train journey from Amsterdam to Paris. A theory of nomadism or the dissolution of boundaries is, as I've noted, a variant of transcendental dissatisfaction with the limits of proximate experience. It is forever engaged in the "there" beyond "here," an anticipated future "then" against an exhausted "now," utopian in Szeemann's phrase.

These positions are worth quoting here, because they make clear that this is no small matter, but one viscerally inscribed as a debate into our demands on what we view as significant art.

ABOVE: Robin Collyer *Yonge Street, Willowdale* 1992 Retouched colour photograph 50.8 x 61 cm
Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery

OPPOSITE: Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller *The Paradise Institute* (interior view) 2001
Courtesy Plug In Gallery/Walter Phillips Gallery

It is not my concern to examine the biennale as such, but Szeemann's leitmotif, flickering through the entire exhibition, could be framed as a recognition of the urgent need for human contact, even for an extraordinary intimacy, that seems coexistent with a fundamental conflict concerning the implications of that need for individual freedom; perhaps, we could say, for individual desire. The need itself seems poised against the desire.

The Paradise Institute is all about being poised between need and desire. It starts with a line-up. At the biennale, this

The representation of whispering is no substitute for the fact

is not extraordinary, but this is no ordinary line-up. The model here is cinema in the old-fashioned sense, when lining up around the corner to see a show was part of the experience. Except that the level of control exerted is heightened by the small numbers able to enter and by the need to “prepare” viewers to cooperate in the tasks assigned to them by the nature of the work. As Wayne Baerwaldt describes it, “*The Paradise Institute* is a repository for memories elicited by our shared knowledge of the artifice of cinema. The most visible portion is its form, a 17-seat self-contained screening room, set within the spiral shape of the Canadian Pavilion.”

A screening room with a difference, however, since it is also a set in which the viewer feels convincingly transported to the upper balconies of a classic movie theatre, complete with rows of seats drifting off towards the central screen far below. To be inscribed into this artifice, the viewers must be ordered into rows, ushered in, seated and instructed on the use of the headphones before the doors are closed and the work engaged. Like a movie, but with a level of control more reminiscent of the airports and flight arrangements by which I came to sit now in this darkened faux movie theatre, this set in which I am expected dutifully to conform as a passive, entirely isolated recipient of the “show.” The show itself is described as a “10-minute original video...like a hybrid genre derived from spy novels, murder mystery thrillers and *film noir*....structured like a cubist collage...”

Two final quotes are useful. The first is again from Baerwaldt: “It is a murky environment where viewers make up stories in their minds about immersion and reconcile themselves to the juxtaposed voices of authority....a seamless bridging of the artifice of cinematic experience with the personalized realities, and the fleeting revelations of Truth.” The second is from Janet Cardiff: “We try to fool people about which reality they are actually in by screwing up the information reaching their senses.”

My first point concerning artworks and their effectiveness was that carnal delight and spiritual ecstasy cannot be choreographed. I have deployed Janet Cardiff’s *A Large Slow River* as a touchstone for what I mean. But Cardiff and Miller’s *The Paradise Institute* is a very different work. It demonstrates those tendencies that I have defined as less a process of recognition than one of entrapment. The work builds on the internal narrative sequences, or collages, that have always marked Cardiff’s productions, including *A Large Slow River*, to the extent that those narratives now redefine this work as cinematic rather than expeditionary.

More than that, even, the work is cinematic in a very specific sense: it pushes cinema into the virtual, where the *here* of the viewer’s space is negated by the *there* of the director’s purpose. No longer allowed to intervene as a participant in the

choreographed event; unable, that is, to display or even indulge a shuffle or a whisper, my disembodiment is employed to presume effects that in fact only I can legitimately produce. I am reminded of Walter Benjamin’s remark that the greatest illumination film can achieve is a condition of distraction. Benjamin was talking about going to the cinema as a public act of free will: together, in a crowded room, whispering to our friends, joking, laughing, coming and going. There is no coming and going allowed in *The Paradise Institute* other than that imposed by the ushers, and the representation of whispering is no substitute for the fact. Need, with all its uncontrollable urgency, cannot be successfully subsumed under the imposition of assumed desire.

If my second point about artworks involves the need to experience physical connection, *The Paradise Institute*’s expansion of cinematic narrative to substitute itself for my own can result, at best, only in a reception of ironic withdrawal from delight and ecstasy, a withdrawal that, moreover, seems central even to its conception. The presence of memory as delivered through the collage of film noir and John le Carré has the whiff of Poe about it. The “then” that imposes itself so strongly in Cardiff and Miller’s piece is a “then” rife with paranoia and dread, a nightmare projection from the past, intangible, fragmentary, haunted—a work for a time of troubles, a time where the dissolution of boundaries can be a very dangerous enterprise.

As with *Yonge Street, Willowdale*, Robin Collyer’s *Kiosk* in the pavilion in 1993 was clear about its boundaries. The pavilion itself was conceived around the discrete nature of the visual artwork, its historic definitional status as an implicit commentary on, rather than elision with, affairs in the world. To enter the Canadian pavilion that year was to enter into an assembly of five iconic three-dimensional images, each of which, like *Kiosk*, acted with respect to one another as words in a sentence. I want to insist on this comparison, because I made the point earlier that, with Collyer, the language within signs has been converted to the language of signs—in this case the palpable form of the sign: *Kiosk*. Language in this mode as both title and object becomes itself palpable, very much *here*, and assumes an equivalent dimension to the icon to which it refers, to the “there” of the object-image. It is this contiguous relationship of here to there that connects *Yonge Street, Willowdale* and *Kiosk* to the viewer within the oscillation I have described as a form of travel.

Alice ran hard to find herself in the place she never left, about to embark upon a game whose moves were clearly established while their possibilities remained entirely undetermined. Collyer’s pavilion in 1993 presented the viewer with a set play of five “moves,” like those sketched out for Alice by the Red Queen. Striking about all of them, *Kiosk* included,

RIGHT: Robin Collyer Installation view at the Canadian Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 1993

BELOW, LEFT: Robin Collyer *Kiosk* 1992 Polyethylene 115 x 180 x 150 cm Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery

BELOW, RIGHT: Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller Video still from *The Paradise Institute* 2001 Courtesy Plug In Gallery/Walter Phillips Gallery



was their quotation of suburban culture and the fabrication of interlocking specific objects whose anonymity produces the realm of possibilities out of which are generated the recognitions that provide the viewer the “carnal delight and spiritual ecstasy” experienced when confronted with Collyer’s work. The viewer of *Kiosk* is free to move from their “here” to Collyer’s “there” unimpeded. If *The Paradise Institute* is overdetermined, in both the technical and popular senses of the term, Collyer’s *Kiosk* is underdetermined, indeterminate and open to moves in a game whose evolution is to be determined by the viewer. Delight and ecstasy thrive in an environment of ambiguity where possibility can be both recognized and invented, where the terms at issue are driven neither by deception nor by imposition. With *Kiosk*, I know where I am, even in a strange land.

There is another aspect that is important to stress: *Kiosk* carries the sign of the toy or model, and consequently the proximity that I suggested in my second thoughtlet. The power of models is that they collapse the distance between that which can be touched and that which can’t, and erotically assert

permissions that can be fulfilled only in the imagination. The choreography lies in the modelling. *Kiosk* appeared at the 1993 biennale within a context of cultural nomadism which, as Szeemann noted, carried an expectation that the ordinary constrictions of definition could be dissolved. The suburban anonymity that Collyer cites might seem to connect his work to themes of dissolution, but it is this very anonymity presented as a stable object, specifically a toy or model, which connects the work instead to a “here-thereness” that defines a space for recognition between viewer and object.

It might seem that I’m making too much of all this. I don’t think so. To get technical about it, I’m talking about the way in which we encounter meaning, and the difference between thinking of something as dictated by intention or a search for value, and thinking about value through something encountered along the way. It’s my experience that you never find what you search for, but that there’s infinite delight and ecstasy in recognizing where you are when you’re already there—like looking through the window on a train from Amsterdam Centraal to Paris Nord. ■