

Ian Carr-Harris, installation shot of one person show at Carmen Lamanna Gallery, September 22 to October 11, 1973

# Staging Language and Representing History

## Ian Carr-Harris, September, 1973

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Ian Carr-Harris' exhibition in 1973 may pass as historical in the transition of Canadian sculpture from formal self-referentiality to reference outside itself. It certainly has to be recovered historically, to be regained as an event. That recovery is appropriate since history and event were so much the subject and presentation of that work. To recover that event is to treat this article as a re-view, as if no critical hindsight had been gained since. Through this critical experiment, a formal division disturbs the continuity of themes before and after this cut into a career, and even the proximity of the artist's name to this work. This cut into a continuity gives the work an undue presence while at the same time denying that presence: it too is split.

This reviewing is not an attempt to re-present the works — to let them stand in their particular presence. The works themselves were divided in

presentation. An exhibition is a form of presentation; its space is not an empty vehicle. These works took into themselves this format and framing. They stage a presentation. What are these tables but stages for the presentation of information that are events themselves. What the works stage is language. What they stage are language-events. By their means of presentation they are "here" in the space of the gallery, but within their frames they represent something else. They are bifurcated as a presence and a reference, a here and an elsewhere, a now and a past, a history and an event.

Seeing the exhibition in 1973, the sculptural context and spatial presence might have been more obvious than it is to us now. Through documentation we tend to read the work and see the language as information. Looking now, we might too readily read the image-text conjunction alone

and forget its presentation. Thus we might reject the work as a dated conceptualism or a simplistic semiotics. Then, the sculpture was familiar, as exaggerated and elevated the tables might be. Minimalism and Duchamp would give us ready reference and access. Then it might have been what is most conventional, that is language, that defamiliarized the work, alienated it from us. Now it is the reverse: language thoroughly familiarizes us with the work. It completely dominates the image as well as effaces the literality of the sculpture. Semiotics has made language transparent; we forget the quiriness of its formulations and presentations, as we have forgotten these works.

What do we make of these tables? The relationship between image and text enacted there is not so simple. The tables are theatrical and utilitarian at the same time — staging language and



Ian Carr-Harris, *A Section of . . .* (1973), stained wood, hair, plaster, letraset on paper, 122 x 72 x 53 cm, courtesy: Carmen Lamanna Gallery

providing a base for its presentation or representation. But as a whole (table and text), the work is a theatricalization of language and situation, and of our situation there. Frames function like tables. There is reason for both being together in this exhibition, the one on the floor, the other on the wall, as well on the tables. Tables and frames separate language from a particular context of use by throwing a spotlight on it or making it into a snapshot, so to speak. They act to turn language (or image) into a quotation. As a quotation, it is not secondary to an original use or presence. Its cutting does not signal it merely as a representation. It can be observed (as a representation) or taken over and acted upon (made performative by use). By that cutting out, that defines a representation or a quotation, these devices of presentation lend the quotation a density that makes it into an event that has its own space and situation. Moreover, we are part of it: the stubborn case of its presentation and our presence there. Language here has the force of a demonstration which can also serve as an example.

The 1973 exhibition at the Carmen Lamanna Gallery then has the force of a demonstration, but it also acts as the space of a classification. The gallery space itself becomes a table of classification. Six tables and six wall-works date from that year; two others are from 1971 and 1972. Although different in nature of construction and installation, each work partakes of the same type of presentation. Each table and wall-work offers a different formal set-up. All the possible variations of image and text in presentation are given, each in a separate work. Thus the space of the exhibition serves as that formal classification with each work as a logical variant. But beyond that formal differentiation, each is a demonstration of language — a case of language where image (or reference) initially is secondary. That illustration, however, has the power to cause a division within language and between that initial identity of language and image.

Whenever language appears here there is no meaning to any particular statement: the seman-

tic content is provided by an illustration or a reference. Language here is to be acted upon by means of that reference. That is, the sentence or phrase is not a logical proposition with attributable truth-value, a linguistic entity, nor a means of communication of a message. By being taken up and acted upon, a difference appears, an identity is split such that there is a temporalizing and a spatializing that asserts the work as a whole as sculptural.

This is the function of the overlaying or juxtaposing of text and image, of doubling the frames and the instances of the "examples" they contain, or of splitting a presence with a language reference. We never find a simple or natural relation between language and image. If we do, we have not put the sculpture to work; we have not separated out the relative weights, relations and registers within each sentence itself and in relation to an image. We have not made these works into sculptures.

"*QUICK! he said, grabbing me*". This statement appears without quotation marks in a frame standing on a table and overlays a photograph that seems to illustrate that "event": a man awkwardly grabs a woman's arm. That awkwardness arises as much from the man and woman standing with their backs to us (to the camera, rather), the man grasping the woman's left arm with his left hand, as from the fact that they seem staged to illustrate the statement, rather than the statement referring back to or narrating an actual event. Already there is a vacillation between documenting and narrating. Which — text or photograph, event or representation — is secondary? Which illustrates the other? By being separated from the continuity of a narrative or an event by the quoting procedures of table and frame, language and photograph, this is an event in itself. But it is an event marked by discontinuities.

Within the continuity of this narrative and the grammatical unity of the sentence, we find different forces, registers and functions that serve to dissolve a sure and natural illustrative connection between image and text. Divided into the three

parts of its syntax, we have a quotation that is reported speech, a narration and a representation of action respectively. Just as we find divisions within this sentence and between it and the image, so we are split in front of the work. There is no simple position for us corresponding to the subject-predicate, subject-object structure of a proposition. We stand in front of the table, held at a distance by that ribbon of text that passes over the image and intercedes between us and it. It is not a script that refers or points us to the subject matter as in a medieval painting. We stand in front of that particular table, separated from the other works on display, cut out from that space by the framing and quoting devices, and we find ourselves divided in front of the presence of this work that is divided itself. The event is uncertain; it is delayed, split in itself. We duplicate that split in registering the forces and divisions within the work. Each time a viewer takes up that "he" or "me", a deferred presence duplicates that awkward standing in front of the work, facing those backs as in the Magritte painting of a man facing a mirror and seeing the reflection of his back.

This division between language and image, between work and event, is repeated on the walls. On the floor, tables and frames are nested, like Chinese boxes. On the wall, divisions occur by doubling: there are two frames. Nearly similar, they repeat something that has to be discerned as different. They do not simply illustrate or demonstrate: their differences must be forced apart. Take the piece whose two texts, one per frame, read: "*A man illustrating the muscles of his back; Lynn, demonstrating that her work is never done.*"

At first sight there seems an identity between image and text in these two frames. In the first, a photograph of a page ripped from a book, a man illustrates the muscles of his back. This description here "proves" the identity of the two. In the other, a black and white photograph with flesh tones touched in, a nude woman, "Lynn", stands against a wall, demonstrates that her work is never done. The sentence constructions are nearly the same: parts could be substituted, sub-



## Two men confirming that they shaped events, rose above the common herd.

Ian Carr-Harris, *Two Men Confirming (in 2 units)* (1973), letraset and tinted photograph on painted masonite, 58 x 42 cm each, courtesy: Carmen Lamanna Gallery

ject for subject, verb for verb, predicate for predicate: man/Lynn, illustrating/demonstrating; the muscles of his back/that her work is never done. Yet, there is a difference between "a man" and "Lynn", between "illustrating" and "demonstrating", between "the muscles of his back" and "that her work is never done" even though they can be substituted for each other in the sentences. It was evident when the phrase "that her work is never done" did not describe its image in the way that "the muscles of his back" did. With the phrase "a man illustrating the muscles of his back" there is an adequacy between image and text — a pure illustrative relationship. The body is constructed, serves as a representation, for that purpose of illustration. It is an object; the man is a general type — he occupies the space of a pure example. But "Lynn" is a proper name; "demonstrating" has the force of an action rather than a representation; and "that her work is never done" is not a predication, but a social relation in the world indicating a social construction of the body. The stereotype of that

phrase is dissolved in an actual social relation, shown under the name, not type, "Lynn". No longer illustrative, it passes between an action and a relation of power. Its action is disguised and divided. Here on the wall, sculpture is displaced: to the social real. This work stands to sculpture as a metalanguage, illustrating the relations between bodies, classification and power.

Thus the difference between illustrating and demonstrating initiates a whole series of works illustrating and demonstrating types, classifications that are social relations at the same time. In *Wendy Sage, being compared with Elizabeth Taylor* two individuals, two names, are compared. To what end is this comparison? Both are individuals; both are named by their proper names; but both are marked differently by these proper names and one is measured by the other. One is an individual shown in all her particularity. Even though we do not know her or know if the label is lying, her name, "Wendy Sage", is stubbornly attached to her. The other is a name of a star, a name that passes into circulation

detached from that body. That name belongs to the construction of a type, an apotheosis of singularity which is a stereotype and a measure — the movie star. Our relation to that name is to a connotative series, not to its denoted individuality.

While in Western culture that proper name ensures our proper individuality, in anthropological documentation one individual can stand as representative of a type. We find this quoted in *Mussurongo Types/Girl at Huila*, two pages photographed from an anthropology journal. There, on one hand, two men stand for Mussurongo types, and, on the other, one girl, photographed front and back, represents Huila. What we would take as a record of a particular event or individual — the photograph as snapshot — serves to classify a type. The apparatus of the lens is one more grid of classification, of mastery. Classification is power as much as it is a form of knowledge.

Just as anthropology determines the limits of Western culture by distinguishing inside and outside (rational and primitive), so designations of high and low within a culture become marks of power as well as grids of specification. Those who have power, have the power to classify and the power to specify, that is, the power of reality. One work juxtaposes high and low, marking this event as a difference of forces more than an accepted opposition. Like *Wendy Sage, being compared with Elizabeth Taylor, I am the Queen of England*. . . sets official construction in an elaborate painting of Elizabeth I to the popular expression of a ditty; "I am the Queen of England/I like to sing and dance/And if you don't like what I do/I'll punch you in the pants". The rhyme begins to repeat itself, and this repetition enables its multiple use, whereas the singularity of the painting ensures its individual ownership.

The low and the outside — workers, primitives, children and women — are generalized into types. The inner elite are unique types — movie stars, heads of state, Kings and Queens. These are and are not specific individuals (after all the King of France as a name was occupied by different individuals over time) as much as unique types. They are those who have the power to impose this distinction upon themselves. The two extremes of typification can be compared across the exhibition in *Mussurongo Types*. . . and *Two men confirming*. . . If the photograph has given a power to depict, in the past being the subject of a painting or a sculpture meant the power to be depicted. Here then are two historical figures, Augustus and Louis XIV, in two representations of themselves (likenesses) that are representations of their power at the same time. As they are taken from photographs in art history books for this work, they stand as examples of art — Roman Imperial, French Baroque; but through the power of their regimes their names as well have passed into styles. Moreover, according to the great man theory of history, they are the names behind historical events. Thus the texts, one to each:

*Two men confirming that they shaped events, rose above the common herd.*

*Two men confirming that they shaped events, found love and affection.*

According to the force of their desires they shaped history, "rose above the common herd", and by the same measure of their acts "found love and affection". What confirms? Their poses, this record of their power confirm that they shaped events and shaped this image. We do not find testament from the other side. Only the identity of the first part of the statements suggests the possibility of the truth of identity of "rose above the common herd" and "found love and affection".

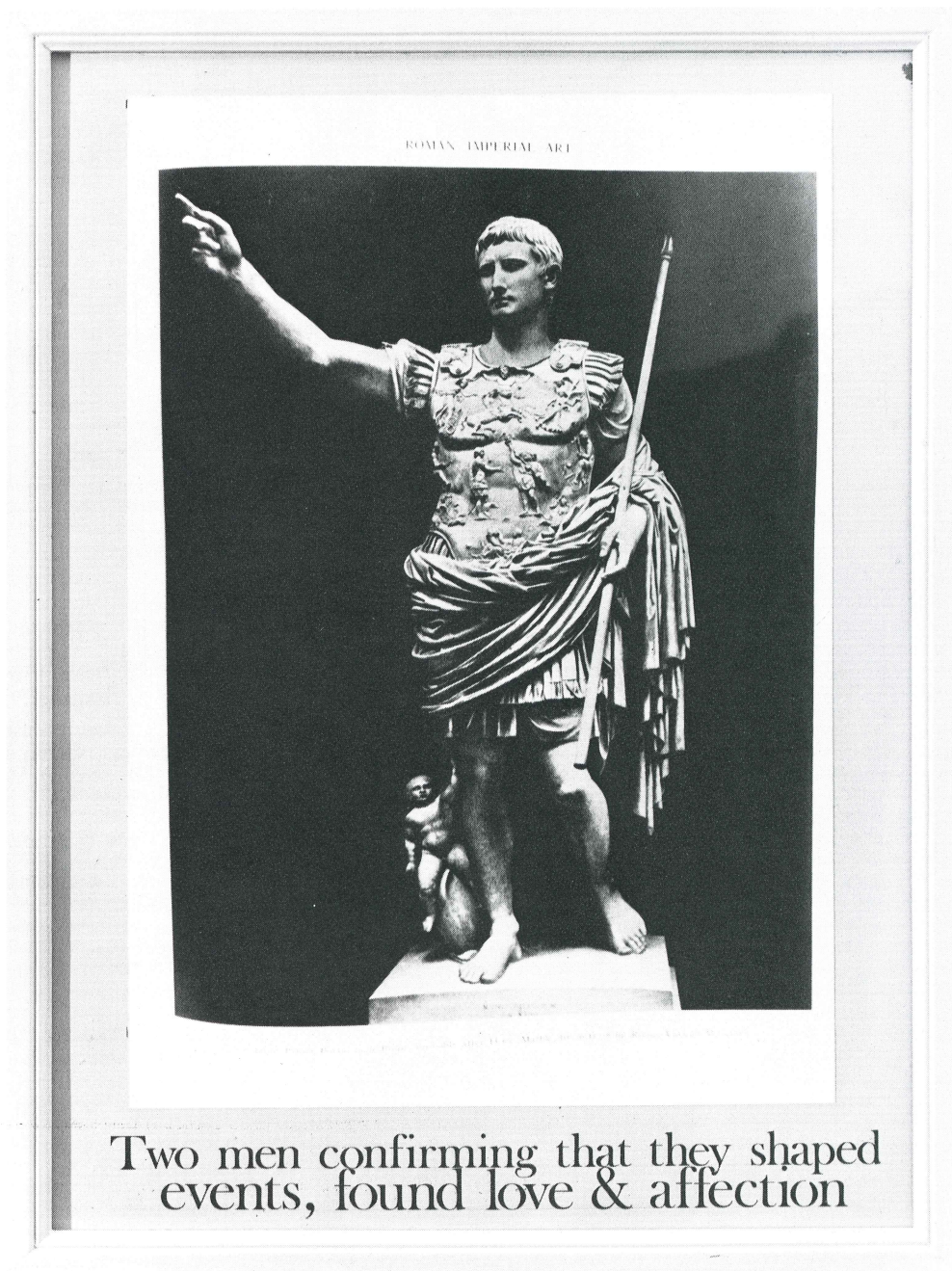
These men are not named in this work except through a general description that we take to apply to them by contingency. In others, names of historical personages, and not images, serve to construct the work and to decompose its assured presence as a sculptural object at the same time. On one table, a plaster cast of a man's thigh is set against a frame that contains the statement: "A section of Julius Caesar's left thigh as it appeared when he mounted his horse to cross the Rubicon". We are referred to an historical figure (Julius Caesar) and an historical event (his crossing of the Rubicon). Within that historical event we are directed to a dramatic moment (the mounting of his horse before. . .) and given the evidence of the plaster cast (a section of Julius Caesar's left thigh as it appeared when he mounted his horse to cross the Rubicon).

All of the following are references: recorded events (biographical, historical); dates; proper names; and they appear in the statement in the work. But of course, this physical evidence, the section of a thigh, is an impossible reference. Since it is a cast whose imprint is unique and contingent to what imprinted it, it is an index which is a type of reference. But it is not a reference according to the statement whose proper referent would be Julius Caesar. While the language reference refers us to another time and place, or to another book, this thigh *dislocates* this piece. As an index, it is here; as a reference, it is connected to an elsewhere. A mere name disturbs. But this thigh is no conceptual disturbance; it is actually there in front of us.

By cutting into the continuity of Ian Carr-Harris' work, this dislocation has turned against me. Initially I thought to take this exhibition as an episode and example of my thesis on reference in Canadian art. With all its logical problems and theoretical shortcomings, I thought of reference as the possibility of a vehicle, a relay or tie to the real. A reference refers outside itself; that is its potential. This sculpture from the early seventies seemed on that way. But we find here instead that reference (by name or description, language or photograph) is only one form of classification, a classification of types more than particular things, not a tie to those things themselves. How could I think to attach the sculptural object to a particular thing or event by means of a reference? Unless it was statuary, which it is not. Nonetheless, the original security of sculpture or statuary is not certain here. Language and photography infiltrate this sculpture's objecthood, so that its presence (and singular statuary reference) is no longer simple. Not only has it been split by language, it has been complicated by reference. Reference directs us from one place to another. An original place and presence is deferred by this division of place. Though we are in that place, we too register that division. Even in its failure, then, reference contributes to the critique of presence, a presence maintained by modernist and phenomenological formalisms. The failure of the referential value of the proper name falls back upon this sculpture and denies its self-presence and self-proximity and any proper analogue of our presence to its.

This sculpture is an object that is a presentation, representation and reference all at the same time, or rather at deferred moments. Language and photography are those means of reference that seem to undermine the self-contained, existential presence of the sculpture — by the fact that they are other than sculpture, and by the fact that they are referential, that is, point away from it. Another figure intervenes in this situation, to make it a situation: the body of the viewer, which bound to the work is of the order of an event, with its own history and contingency.

We are tied to that situation for a duration, as with minimalist sculpture. Our presence there,



Ian Carr-Harris, *Two Men Confirming (in 2 units)* (1973), letraset and tinted photograph on painted masonite, 58 x 42 cm each, courtesy: Carmen Lamanna Gallery

however, is not as secure as minimalist temporalization made it out to be. As we stand as an "I" to this work, so we should note that the personal pronoun, called an indexical or shifter, is both conventional and existential; it has a proper use each time that it is used in speech. The particularity and contingency that we attach to our situation there could be lent to giving the work's reference, or reference in general, a reality. By the evidence of this work we have not found that reference to be secure: it is split. Initially pointing away, it returns to the sculpture and returns us to our space in front of it. This is both an event and a structure of identity; but an identity is split in this temporal movement. Both presence and reference are divided; presence is delayed as much as references are cut off and events deferred. Splitting that space may undermine that sculpture's presence as well as our own. But splitting produces a spatializing and temporalizing that could only be considered as sculptural. Remaining sculpture under these terms undermines sculpture's original presence

and identity, as well as our own and the artist's. We should remember, however, that we too are a disturbance to that sculpture's presence. We are the possibility of a relay to its references. As reference points out and returns to the sculpture, it points to us: we may be its referent.

There are no titles to these works. They are referred to simply by abbreviating the text to the first few words. Neither does the artist stand to these works. he is detached from them if we accept the logical consequences of this use of reference. Neither the work nor the exhibition can be secured under the name of the artist. This name abbreviates to an "I" in another language, "ICH"; but it too is split in its doubling: "Carr-Harris". Announced by this name, the exhibition cannot take place under it. As much as the exhibition is referenced to a space ("Carmen Lamanna Gallery, Toronto") and a time ("September 22 - October 11, 1973"), it cannot be classified and take a place. Paradoxically, it cannot take place. □