



Robin Collyer Photographs



Yonge Street, Willowdale (#4)

1995, RETOUCHE COLOUR PHOTOGRAPH, 50.8 X 61.0 CM

Generic City: Robin Collyer's Retouched Photographs, 1992–1998

PHILIP MONK

But I thought Toronto was just right, the paradigm of North American cities (although it's not recognized like all the others)... Toronto is anonymous, and most of Cronenberg's films have been set there. Part of the eeriness of his early Toronto films is because you don't know where you are.

— J. G. Ballard on Cronenberg's *Crash*

Although primarily known as a sculptor, Robin Collyer consistently works in photography as well. Sometimes his photographic activity has paralleled his practice in sculpture, almost seeming to be source material for it, sometimes it has diverged. Collyer uses the photograph to create ironic juxtapositions in the landscape, such as in *Ghost Town, California* (1995), or he straight-forwardly documents the hybrid structures people inventively create from their surroundings, as in *Bisbee, Arizona* (1984) in which the rear end of a car has been added to the bed of a pickup truck. In the former, he creates the situation but in the latter, the situation already exists for the taking. In both cases, a semiotic sign is generated through the agency of photography. Collyer engages more directly with semiotics when he uses the photograph to look at the relationships between image and text, as with *Untitled (magazine)* (1979). In his retouched photographs of the 1990s, the irony of *Ghost Town* has been put on hold and image-text relationships relaxed to the point of a curious disappearance.

In this new series of retouched photographs, Collyer depicts Toronto, the city I live in, but in a way that I never experience its cityscape. With the most modest technique, he photographs the urban core and suburban strips—their parking lots, mini-malls, advertising and impromptu signage; then, in the most subtle way, he deletes all text—whether it be found on street or store signs, advertising, posters, licence plates or product labeling. This deletion brings the cityscape to view in an altered way. The picture of his hometown Collyer presents is not a pretty one; he does nothing to beautify his images. His is a banal technique applied to a banal subject, but it is a banality we live with here. By “here,” I mean not just Toronto but North America, the place whose settlement by

Europeans has been coincident with the rise of capitalism, to the point that we live within cities that have been completely shaped by its history. Collyer's retouched photographs have an uncanny familiarity that comes with the experience of our perceptions being slightly off, as if a minor displacement has taken place in our visual field. It's an experience I've had at times viewing filmic representations of Toronto.

Everyday, to and from work, I routinely take the Lakeshore, a multi-lane road that skirts the old industrial harbour of Toronto and runs beneath the decaying infrastructure of the expressway the length of my drive. Like other decrepit waste spaces of the city, it is a nondescript place of little visual pleasure, no different from other cities as it cuts through a blighted industrial landscape partly regenerated by the studios of the local film industry. Nondescript, that is, until I watch a certain production by one of those studios: David Cronenberg's *Crash*, set not on J. G. Ballard's London motorways but on Toronto's freeways. Here I recognize my everyday, yet transformed, reality, as I am cued by local landmarks of no remarkable character and other minor clues such as Ontario licence plates. Toronto is no longer for me the substitute city, standing in for Anywhere, USA, that I recognize in most films made here.

The pleasure of recognition enacted for me through Cronenberg's grafting of the perverse desires of Ballard's book onto Toronto's roads is not shared by the writer of the British Film Institute book on *Crash*. Iain Sinclair asserts that "Ballard was delighted to see his novel removed from all the markers that tied it to place, to potentially autobiographical specifics," but believes that the "subtopian nowhere" of Toronto "was the place where Ballard's dream went to die." Toronto, whose streets are "so featureless they operated like a sick neon labyrinth," is apparently so bereft of markers that it actually is the perfect host for a science fiction graft.¹

Collyer's photographs are computer manipulated, but they are not fictional. However, their construction parallels the operations of science fiction, conjecturally modifying a commonplace reality by the addition or subtraction of an element that throws everything out of balance. The narratives of science fiction pursue the logic of this contagion or lack to its conclusion. Collyer, likewise, examines various signage situations, not in a rational manner that is didactically brought to our attention in a documentary style, but rather, almost inadvertently; at least, inadvertency is the effect for his viewers, since a glance does not reveal what his work is about.

Although Collyer subtracts something from the image, he leaves the integrity of the photograph intact. He simply adjusts one aspect of the photograph's referentiality by deleting any text within the image. The digital effects in Collyer's photographs are not always immediately perceptible. Advertising might be the obscured foundation of a number of these images by virtue of the perverse elimination of its messages, but Collyer's imperspicuous images cannot be confused with advertising's direct appeal. His manipulation is subtle, silent and unannounced, but no less transformative: everything remains basically the same, but is totally different. Texts might be erased, but their supports remain. Just as the sign is the support for its text, so the photograph is the ground or

support for the image. However, the effect that the retouched image produces is not photographic. The photograph is simply the means through which to view the transformation that the deletion effect puts into effect.

When Collyer first began this series, the technology to modify photographs was available to the photography industry and soon afterwards to home computers. Widespread availability brought out the worst aspects of the technology, its special effects gimmickry, but the digitalization of the medium also immediately confounded the indisputable truth of photography. (Although individual images can always be seen to be constructed, their referential authority was far less contested at that time.) Collyer wanted to use this new technology against itself, in a manner that expressed a negative value but also carried with it some of the history of photo-retouching as cosmetic cleanup. The deletion procedure was carried out as a rule, but also without preconception. The question asked and answered through the procedure was: What would the urban landscape look like through the cleanup of its signage?

The answer is... not much different. However, the difference brought about by the procedure causes us to look at the urban landscape in a new way. A simple exercise of deletion would only play into the facility of computer manipulation; something else takes place in these photographs. Collyer makes us look at various circumstances in the cityscape where signage has infiltrated our daily lives. By stripping away text, he does not reveal that an Edenic state underlies the corruption of commerciality, that without it we would enjoy a civil society and not a commercial existence. Unencumbered by its signage, the built environment here reveals nothing of a civil society. Rather, Collyer shows that, while Toronto has not “learned from Las Vegas,” the relationships that seem to predominate here are those between the car and commodities, as mediated by signage. This relay of the individual through signage (even with the disappearance of text—the dominant part of its expression) is the one obvious connection in Collyer’s photographs as we move from image to image—from street, to store fronts, to signage, to interior displays of products, all treated, with different results, to the same procedure. Collyer creates a direct dialogue with his subject. The relay of the individual through signage has its obverse in the parasitic invasion of social space by the commercial appeals of advertising or signage.

Both the aesthetic and the clutter of signage have long attracted photographers, notably Walker Evans, William Klein and Robert Frank, to mention a few. The photographic print, of course, found a formal parallel in the designs of two-dimensional signage, but the proliferation of signage was for these artists evidence of what we were becoming in America, living among our machines and advertising. Collyer takes a reverse tack, but with a similar aim. What does this reversal signify? Are advertising and signage so established—so seemingly natural—in our culture that only their removal can make us aware of their invasion?

By deleting text, Collyer creates an absence in our visual field. His perverse subtraction leaves an image only, an image that yet is telling of social space. However, the society that orders this space believes that an image can only exist in public as part of a message.



Drugstore, Toronto

1996, RETOUCHE COLOUR PHOTOGRAPH, 50.8 X 61.0 CM

Few images exist in the public realm that are not anchored by some form of text, unless they are the result of some artist's intervention or an advertising campaign that will soon be completed by its message component. For this reason, Collyer's images may be hard to read. This effort in looking is both assisted and frustrated by photography. On the one hand, his images rely on the traditional fascination of looking that photography permits through the framing and the miniaturization of a real-life subject. On the other hand, their "non-aesthetic" relies neither on the formats nor the effects of documentary photography and advertising. Thus the photographs have to be read in another way. Collyer's sleight of hand creates a scopic field where only certain details are lacking: a zero degree of signage remains. Commenting on these images as a writer, I find myself writing not about what is there but what is absent, yet, at the same time, still structures the scene.

In his first manipulated photographs, Collyer applied the procedure to the streetscape. For instance, in the first photograph Collyer completed, *Yonge Street, Willowdale (#1)* (1992), the erasure brings the store signage of the suburban strip to our attention, as if the supports of the signs were now monochrome paintings adorning their façades. In this photograph, the city is devoted as much to cars as to buildings. Furthermore, the buildings function only as supports for billboards that are addressed to passing cars. Despite the predominance of billboard imagery here, Collyer's retouched photographs demonstrate that, contrary to common assumption, text prevails in our environment — not images.

Advertising and signage have no formal place of address on the street, but they insinuate themselves everywhere. In images like *Queen Street West* (1995), which features posters stapled to storefronts and glued on poles and a newsbox, their siting seems unregulated. *Queen Street West* shows just how given over our public space and buildings are to commercial and ad hoc signage. In other instances, advertising manifests itself as an issue of property relations, as in *Adelaide Street* (1993), with its retouched Benetton billboard installed on the side of a building. Here advertising speaks both to the commodity relations established through the image (in spite of the fact that the Benetton advertising campaign attempts to skew these issues) and to the derivation of capital by any means from ownership of the site. These two images also enact a contest of expression — between the deleted messages of ad hoc street signage and the remains of advertising that has been validated by capitalism.

With a sculptor's eye, and with a view to his own work perhaps, Collyer emphasizes the structural supports, the appropriated physical apparatus of display that formerly carried text. *Goodwill* and *Showboat* (both 1993) feature supports that are both temporary yet express opposite social values. The building in *Showboat*, actually a fake paddlewheel boat, is a giant advertisement and ticket outlet for a Broadway musical revival in a provincial municipality. *Goodwill* depicts a trailer with recycling bins in front, the drop-off depot for Goodwill stores — retail for the impoverished. While the private enterprise billboard of *Showboat* is given pride of place in the municipal mall, its opposing sign of value is relegated to a waste-strip parking lot near a condo complex.

Earlier series of Collyer's photographs show how buildings, even though devoid of any text, still function like signs. In his series "Infill Housing/Monster Homes," newly built, oversized houses ostentatiously stand out next to the older traditional homes of their neighbours. In his "Bungalow-Style Substations" series, electrical substations mimic the architectural styles of their residential surroundings, but the attempted integration into their milieu is betrayed by their strange blankness as artificial homes. In other photographic works, Collyer has focused on the sign itself. For example, in *Tangle Briarway* (1988), the photographic framing of the street sign of the title creates a new, ironic signification as the photograph shows the sign's arbitrary relation to its referent—a barren, straight suburban street.

Any referential dimension to the signs in Collyer's retouched photographs, by contrast, vanishes along with the removal of text. Other information lingers, nonetheless. In *Election Sign* (1995), both colour and logo signify a known political party (curiously, the remaining Conservative Party logo is smaller than the recycling symbol). This negation of the individual whose name no longer appears is reinforced by the throwaway character of the ad hoc signage. *Election Signs* (1995) shows the periodic, parasitic invasion of our roadsides by this type of sign. Collyer furthers the election signs' redundancy (many obviously belong to the same candidates) by making these signs equivalent to the other illicit postings on the lamp pole in the foreground of the image. Time sensitive, they also linger as litter, emblems now only of winners and losers.

In the later photographs in the series, Collyer moves the signage situation inside the store, to the point of purchase. In *Drugstore, Toronto* (1996), deleting the text from packaging labels shows product families displayed together on the shelves; but this ordering of our vision on the store's part is deficient without the product labeling on each of the packaged drugs. Text classifies, and classification is necessary for exchange: there can be no commodities without classification. In completing the product cycle, Collyer applies his technique to places of refuse and recycling—*Litter* (1995) and *Value Village* (1996), respectively.

In the retouched photographs, Collyer has not just shown us how much advertising and signage dominate our visual field—we already know that. By selecting this site and then stripping away part of its image, he makes us concentrate, not necessarily on what the removal obscures, but on the social relations that were always there, concretized in the site. Even though people generally are absent in his images, their social relationships pre-exist in the image. These relationships are especially apparent when we compare two photographs, such as *Goodwill* and *Showboat*. In general, every image implies a social relation, just as every commodity exchange embodies a number of social relations. In our society, advertising is the means through which we ensure the continuation of these exchanges and hence, the perpetuation of these kinds of social relations. The cityscape is the matrix of these social interactions.

Given Collyer's history in sculpture and photography, it is hard to look on this body of photography only as a moralizing critical commentary; at least, it has room for more than

just a critique. Collyer's attention to peoples' acts of bricolage as inventive means of coping with their environments, and his adoption of its principles in his own sculpture, makes me think that he is attentive to the ad hoc signs of expression, need or desire within our environment. People rework the leftover materials and signs given them by the dominant culture, or they insinuate their desires into a functional system that was not made to accommodate them, as in Ballard's/Cronenberg's *Crash*. The fact that this ongoing series tentatively concludes with *Collection* and *Drawer* (both 1998), two photographs of areas in his son's bedroom that hint at the complex cultural integration of a child through the commodities directed at him, suggests to me that Collyer believes that we cannot reduce the complexity of our experience to a simple sign — or its erasure.

Note

1. Iain Sinclair, *Crash: David Cronenberg's Post-mortem on J. G. Ballard's 'Trajectory of Fate'* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 76, 88.



Temperance Street

1993, RETOUCHE COLOUR PHOTOGRAPH, 50.8 X 61.0 CM