



Ian Carr-Harris

Works : 1992 - 2002

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by Philip Monk

with an essay by Antonio Guzman

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After Dürer (detail), 1989
cabinet, print, film loop, rear projection screen, 16 mm sound projector
variable dimensions



Deaccessionings

Philip Monk

Works : 1992 - 2002

My work situates itself in that space we reserve for our recognition that the histories and structures which we use to give definition to identity are themselves contingent and fluid, no less elusive than the identities we wish to secure. Through shifts of emphasis, the work seeks to disturb our field of knowledge while leaving it also apparently intact. Nothing has been factually changed, nothing has been invented or promoted; it is simply that some insertion, perhaps a footnote or a repetition, maybe an archaism, or just an object in a room, has complicated the linear flow of anticipated narrative — and we realize, with an atavistic pleasure, that we never are where we thought we were.

— Ian Carr-Harris, 1993

My work centres on acts of re-tracing — we could call it “re-touching” — conceived as forms of demonstration. Events rather than objects, they require that we look at something that we already “know,” and in that looking to discover — not quickly, nor entirely grasped — something we took for granted.

— Ian Carr-Harris, 1997

Preamble

Ian Carr-Harris makes works that pass for other things but are not quite. He makes sculptures that look like furniture but have no such function. He poses them in the gallery space, creating a theatrical effect, as if they were part of some occluded narrative that we are too late to experience. Somewhat precipitately abandoned perhaps, nevertheless these obdurate objects maintain an aura that makes our experience of them rather more of an event.

This exhibition is a survey of Carr-Harris's work of the past ten years, with the addition of an earlier piece, *After Dürer* (1989). *After Dürer* is exhibited separately from the other works here as a reminder of the artist's audiovisual installations of the 1980s, of which this piece marked the conclusion. It reveals a number of concerns that are constant within his oeuvre. Typical of that particular period, the installation exposes all its elements to view: cabinetry and audiovisual equipment, including speaker, projector and screen (all custom fitted by the artist). The cabinet houses a reproduction of the well-known print of an Indian rhinoceros by the German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer. A button on the cabinet, when pushed by the viewer, starts a film shot by the artist of a real rhinoceros at the Toronto Zoo. Between reproduction and reality an obvious discrepancy exists, but the work also points to other questions: How do schemas of knowledge impose themselves through representation on our experience of the world, and how does even imagination map convention onto our perception of it?¹

These questions are posed within a theatre of demonstration, so to speak. An unusual classroom, this theatre of demonstration. Some might find the discourse delivered there dry and academic. However, in definition "exhibition" and "demonstration" amount to about the same thing, so the self-reflexivity of *After Dürer* dramatizes the conditions of presentation. Yet what Carr-Harris's works show and what they dramatize are two different things. The tables, cabinets and shelves that frequently reappear in Carr-Harris's work are not mere supports; they are implicated frameworks: they stage various scenarios. We might take these scenarios to be models or demonstrations, but, in effect, the tableaux they stage are allegorical, which, as Walter Benjamin wrote, "transforms things into stirring writing."² It might surprise us, then, to realize that the schoolbookish works in exhibition here seem preponderantly about ruin, loss and abandonment; they are memorial and melancholy emblems of allegory.

Index

A pile of books thrown on a flimsy card table hardly suggests the armature of an intellectual system. Yet, whenever a book appears in Carr-Harris's work, the whole system of the Classical order of representation and its project of the encyclopedia surfaces with it. Not only is the artist himself an art teacher, which perhaps explains the pedagogical bent of some of his art, but he is also an ex-librarian trained in larger systems of classification; so, bibliophile as well, he is also attentive to the

nuances of bibliographic inscription, to the vertiginous other world that footnotes, for instance, open for reflection, which a writer like Borges has fictionally exploited so well.³ Both the colonializing arrogance of the grand schemes of knowledge and their obverse, the recessive domains of imagining that the Book opens to language, seem worlds passing, their shared episteme overthrown. The architectonics of the library system create a conceptual spatialization whose ruin as well can be represented. Here in *Index* (1993), as the tabletop tableau Carr-Harris stages, the upright statutes of the library are in disarray. Its surpassed systems and classifications, its dated forms of ordering knowledge, as if so many signs—even though the things themselves—divorced from their references, lie disposed for deaccessioning. Representative of the whole system, its indices are foreclosed and abandoned.

The title *Index*, gold foil-stamped on the institutional hard covers of the volumes, names the generic function of each book. More than a double functioning reference (it also names the work itself), the title refers to the disciplinary purpose of the book but also indicates, by way of the artist's staging, the fallenness of that enterprise. If the mnemonic system of the library seems in ruin, how are we collectively to remember, except repetitiously to retrace with our index finger the contours of an estranged inscription detached from its origins—as if, the ruins of an ancient civilization, the fallen columns of books with their obscure titles can only be looked at but not comprehended?

Made in Hong Kong

Our inability to put our finger on the precise meaning of any particular Carr-Harris sculpture, which appears so much like any commonplace object that we usually overlook, makes us pause during our nebulous encounters with these things to wonder, What are we looking at? When we turn a corner in the exhibition, we come upon two of these furniture-like sculptures theatrically but awkwardly disposed in the space. *Made in Hong Kong* and *Jan. – Mar.* (both 1993) look as though they have been abandoned, left half moved in a warehouse, as if their agents' activity was disrupted. Hanging in the trajectory of an action rather than embodied in a use, these sculptures beckon to us to complete their meaning. Perhaps instead these furnishings are half looted: two figurines and a pile of books remain in the large wall cabinet of *Made in Hong Kong*. The residue of their placement suggests a history, but maybe these objects have been abandoned by time itself. One can almost feel the dust settling in this twilight atmosphere as the objects are not only bereft of use but are slowly slipping from the ground of place and time as well. Are we, then, looking at an object or experiencing an event, a narrative act that includes ourselves?

The fragment of generic counter in *Jan. – Mar.* is separated from its architectural context as much as from whatever its commercial or bureaucratic function might have been; nevertheless, the pile of magazines left on its countertop oddly situates it spatially and temporally and adds a story of its own. Examining the counter, we discover no more forensic evidence of its history than a label on one of its drawers: "Jan. – Mar." it reads. The title of the work also designates some system of classification within it. This institutional categorizing of time differs from that which the seemingly abandoned pile of magazines might signify, so much is the latter at odds with its circumstances (who has left it?).

Wrapped with packing tape like so many recyclables, the pile of magazines is as disposable as experience itself, whose lost time these mass market products can be seen to measure. Nonetheless, the pile secretly harbours within itself another history — that of past exhibitions. It is an index of the place and time of the work's various showings. Currently, a pile topped by an image of the ever topical Madonna from the sculpture's last presentation in America has supplanted the collection of porno magazines from Amsterdam's red light district, where it was previously exhibited in 1994. The artist has thus made the moment of the work's exhibition a component of its construction. This temporal embeddedness persists, like a snapshot, when the work travels to new exhibition venues. With every exhibition, the work inhabits two moments of time: that of our "actual" experience, and that of a displaced fold in time that opens to incorporate us as viewers.

What if this opening also subtly disincorporates us? Carr-Harris has said that he is interested in objects for their surrogate relationship to us. A surrogate relationship makes these things, thus, more than objects, if we think of an "object" as a thing that we behold or conceive before us, whose relationship to us is completely determined by this looking. The pile of magazines has a strategic role to play in establishing another relationship. The surrogate nature of the counter on which it rests — although fabricated by the artist, it simulates a ready-made placed in a gallery space — already brings us up short before it. By "surrogate," however, Carr-Harris does not merely indicate the substitutive or mimetic character of his sculpture. What is real, lying upon it — the pile of magazines — catches us unaware, perhaps inducing an unexpected and out-of-place, mild erotic frisson in us. This sensation would have been more obvious in *Jan. – Mar.*'s Amsterdam presentation, a condition that persists, however, in a like functioning work *1-(900) 999-6969* (1991), a roughly constructed counter similarly with another pornographic magazine on top of it. The surrogate relationship Carr-Harris wishes to establish is that of another *body*, which makes sculpture an erotic as well as a rhetorical discourse.

Captured by the look of the work — its gaze, so to speak — we are caught in the specular image of our desire. This mirror image repeats our appearance, so caught, in the gaze of others in the gallery space, ourselves possessed and dispossessed at the same time. "The specular dispossession which at the same time institutes and deconstitutes me is also the law of language," and the deferments of temporality, we might add.⁴ The semantics of tense "embodies" this for us, positioning us temporally through language, repeating our self-possession standing before the work as object. "It would seem that we are situated to a great degree by tense: past, present, and future," Carr-Harris has written, thus seeming to confirm our uncomplicated though obdurate relationship to these sculptures in the present tense of our experience. As we have seen in *Jan. – Mar.*, this ontological relationship is not so simple but carries within it the trace of otherness that solicits yet denies self-presence or auto-affectation.⁵ Drawing from Jacques Derrida's notion of the trace, the artist noted a contrary "insistence in the trace on the *instability*, the *contingency* of the present, on the fluidity of the tense — *under tension* — in which the past and the future merge in the determination of 'that which is to have been traced.'"⁶ That which is to have been traced will be the pre-figurement of our desire.

Made in Hong Kong and *Jan. – Mar.* belong to a series of works that, according to Carr-Harris, employ "familiar objects to demonstrate the paradox of objects: that their very concreteness is dependent on their transformation over time." The artist has also said that he is "fascinated by the indeterminacy of sculpture's borders, the fact that our experience of sculpture is very fluid — it's not about a fixed

image.” The interlacing of a paradoxical temporal transformation and indeterminate spatial borders takes place in our engagement: we are the indexical pronouns—the “you” or “I”—filled by the moment of the work’s address. Thus, both sculpture and spectators themselves are open to flux, to narratives, sometimes (subjectless) “memoirs,” that only partially coalesce in momentary conjunctions. In these touchings, we experience the object, not its function or reference, but itself anew. Nothing ersatz, as if made in Hong Kong, but an advent.

8, rue Ferrand

Not even an object, but an event—such would precisely describe a class of works Carr-Harris periodically produces. For example, *8, rue Ferrand* (2002) is made from only the slightest, but most dramatic, of theatrical materials—light itself. This light projection is one of several Carr-Harris has created that artificially re-enact the passage of sunlight through time across a particular space: here a hallway in an art school in Valenciennes, northern France, where the artist exhibited in 1995. A specific space is recreated by the merest tracing of light cast artificially from a projection mechanism that the artist manufactures. The space is recreated in one of two ways: more typically, as in *231 Queens Quay West* (1998), where it replicates a natural play of light that has been occluded on its own site, for instance, where the windows have been walled over for art gallery purposes; or, as in *8, rue Ferrand*, where it is displaced to and originally shown in another locale.⁷

Our experience is hardly modified as we pass through the installation of *8, rue Ferrand* at The Power Plant. We are touched only in the most ambient fashion by a play of light that proceeds in its slow pace without us. At the same time, though, we are divided, because of a dislocation fundamental to the work, between the “here” of The Power Plant and the “there” of the address of the title, and between the “now” of our experience and the “then” of a moment of the past that has been reproduced for us. Neither the shining itself, nor our memory of it—therefore neither a presence nor an absence—this play of light rather is a mnemonic fiction. It is produced as a reproduction, sustained in a mechanical repetition that originally divides both it and our experience of it in every instance of its presentations. Memory is only a succeeding trace of each of these fundamental divisions.

Narcissus

The engraving: art being born of imitation only belongs to the work proper as far as it can be retained in an engraving, in the reproductive impression of its outline. If the beautiful loses nothing by being reproduced, if one recognizes it in its sign, in the sign of the sign which a copy must be, then in the “first time” of its production there was already a reproductive essence.

— Jacques Derrida⁸

It is not, therefore, for its metaphoric indeterminacy that light seems to play such a large role recently in the artist's work. On the contrary, in the back-lit book works, such as *Books of Knowledge* (1992–) and *Encyclopedia Britannica; a new survey of Universal Knowledge. Chicago, University of Chicago, 1944* (1996–), its use is quite pointed. In all these book works presented splayed open, where a plate faces the text it illustrates, light cuts out a detail from a photo-engraved image. For example, in *Narcissus* (1994) backlighting highlights the head of a narcissus flower. Light's function is to illustrate the illustration, to illuminate it, so to speak, as the dictionary defines one of illustration's meanings. If the encyclopedia seems the embodiment of Enlightenment rationality (with all its metaphors of the light of reason), light here, rather than being illuminative, takes on a disruptive function. In the artist's words, it becomes "a vertiginous element within the intimate act of reading." Light turns the image into even more of an emblem, making of the ensemble of image and text an object to be looked at rather than read. Framed within the frame of the vitrine that *Narcissus's* table constructs, the book lends itself to a sensory, not readerly, experience. Detached from the literary, its glow, all the same, may induce a reverie of loss suggestive of the myth of Narcissus.⁹

Nevertheless, within this mythic garden of the origin of desire—no matter how spontaneously sprung that act may seem to be—we discover a "reproductive essence." In retouching the image, light in effect doubles it, separating the image from its original imprint. A replicative act is inserted into an already reproductive medium. The book may seem only illustrational, yet it symbolizes the archive of culture. Not only in the subjects and forms of their classification, these photo-engraved images have the look of the nineteenth century about them: they are already images of images, hence an imaginary museum. The presence of the book *and* print together places such works within the mutually reinforcing discourses of the library and museum, archival discourses that are already inscribed by the reproductive technologies of these media, no matter if these institutions are dedicated to the artifacts of individual genius. Reproduction makes the repository and what comes before as tradition housed in these institutions part of a process of repetition to which pedagogy presses the individual to conform. The origin of desire is another's invention that we repeat according to the "statutes" we find in books or the "book" of our culture. Culture is pedagogy. So like schoolchildren, we trace and retrace the lineaments of our desire in the image of an other.

Molly

"Pedagogy cannot help but encounter the problem of imitation."¹⁰ So another class of Carr-Harris's work is the blackboard of the type found in elementary school rooms. If the subject's position is grammatical, here is one of the institutions of its inscription. As if they are so many examples of orthography and proper penmanship, the artist emblemizes in script components of this constitution on the blackboards of the collective series *Language* (2001–), with its individual works with subheadings "Writing: noun," "Writing: verb," "Writing: subject," "Writing: object," etc., thus reproduced. But in *Molly* (2002), he offers a perverse object lesson of writing with no punctuation. In fact, the text to *Molly* repeats the last lines of one of the monuments of high modernism: James Joyce's *Ulysses*, an unusual choice for such pedagogical discipline. If our "detention" was indefinite enough in our copying of lines, we might reach the beginning of this example with its echoing "yes" that

commences Molly's monologue and is repeated by the reaffirmative "Yes" at its end here, the last word of Joyce's text.

In between, the "yes" is relayed many times, and in Carr-Harris's reiteration — "and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes" — each "yes" is emphatically highlighted by backlighting. In turn we say yes, write "yes" to the text that advertises this word to us, what example has it given us? Thus the problem of any pedagogical lesson: are we learning by rote or by heart?

Beyond its purported lesson, does the "yes" in *Molly* carry another value for the artist, confirmation of its affirmation, that speaks of the desire of the artist through the words of the character, the expression of her heart? Does it recall some reminiscence the artist wants to affirm through the substitution of the feminine evocation here? Yet the word "yes" is many things when it "is written, quoted, repeated, archived, recorded, gramphoned, or is the subject of translation or transfer," as it is in *Ulysses*. "In order for the yes of affirmation, assent, consent, alliance, of engagement, signature or gift to have the value it has, it must carry the repetition within itself. It must *a priori* and immediately confirm its promise and promise its confirmation. This essential repetition lets itself be haunted by an intrinsic threat, by an internal telephone which parasites it like its mimetic, mechanical double, like its incessant parody."¹¹ Like its lesson retraced here.

Annabel

Evoked through the name of another female, once again reveries of temporal passage and loss are foremost but even more improbably expressed in Carr-Harris's *Annabel* (1999). In this twelve-minute audio work, the MAC computer voice, Fred, reads excerpts from Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel *Lolita* on the nymphet precursor to *Lolita*, the said Annabel. *Lolita* is written in an overwrought style: "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style," the pseudonymous author (Humbert Humbert, not Nabokov) opines in his reminiscences of Annabel. Such a statement signals Nabokov's mimicry of the literary models that effect the voice of his narrator — both his style and his desire or, rather, the style of his desire. It alerts us both to the role of culture in the formation of affect and the subject's predication in language. Famously, Emma Bovary's affair is written already by the Romance novels she consumes. If the subject's position is of grammatical origin, what of the disembodied, uninflected and unanimated voice of *Annabel*? An entity with no subject (the computer) "reads" the prose of a carefully constructed fictional entity who is confessing, intimately but with an ear to style, his obsessions. A mechanical memory, moreover, merely covers this writing by reading over it; its reminiscences carry no affective value. Yet, strangely, the banality of the voice and the irony of the overwrought writing seem to cancel each other, leaving as essence — or, same thing, trace — a strange mix of longing and loss.

“The desire for memory and the mourning of *yes* set in motion the anamnestic machine. And its hypermnestic overacceleration. The machine reproduces the living, it doubles it with its automation.”¹² Does Carr-Harris lament this more fundamental loss than that of living memory — the giving way to the automaton? Or as for Humbert’s near contemporary Krapp, the protagonist of Samuel Beckett’s 1958 play *Krapp’s Last Tape*, does the trace machine become the archive of the disavowed or forgone pleasure, a melancholy reminder of and model, in fact, for the absence of plenitude?

Conclusion

Within the divided trace of the already inscribed, Carr-Harris’s works register a double movement: on the one hand, they present themselves as a falling away and disinvestment of the sign from an absent referent (an original plenitude or an always already deferred reproduction/repetition?), which, on the other hand, leaves in its place a trace that is doubled or retraced in our abandonment by our retouching (a consolation or a constitution?). One does not succeed the other: fallen thought is memory trace, or, rather, each is inscribed in the other as this double movement.

This movement can be read in the change from Carr-Harris’s early work that this exhibition marks. Compare *After Dürer* to the differing works in the exhibition that succeed it. In *After Dürer*, the spectator is asked to match the representation of the print against the so-called reality of the film image and to realize the gap between these constructions. In the succeeding works, representations now only call forth other representations in an infinite regress, never settling in reality: a book refers to a book of books (the Index), which refers to the library, which refers to the Book of Knowledge of the universe, etc. Do we lament this infinite deferment of the referent, or in some way take pleasure in the indices of its mediate touchings?

Carr-Harris’s lesson is not a sad one. If we are to believe autobiographical reference, it can become a joyful science. Relating the story of his seven-year-old self tracing a comic book image against a sunlit window, the artist confesses, “What I came to realize was that no subsequent experience, no amount of exercising ‘originality,’ no amount of making ‘something new’ had ever touched me so deeply, excited me as much, as that discovery of the ‘trace.’”¹³

Notes

1. Within this comparative apparatus, Carr-Harris does not assert the new realism over the old: both are representations.

2. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 176.

3. The closed rationality of the library opens a world to the imagination; see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1970) in general and his essay "Fantasia of the Library" in particular [*Language, Counter Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977)]. The precursors of Carr-Harris's back-lit illustrated books were table works of footnoted books and sculptural assemblages, such as *The Anchor Bible. Judith; a new translation with introduction and commentary by Carey A. Moore* (Garden City, N.Y., 1985), 23 and *McClung, Nellie L. Clearing in the West: my own story, Toronto, 1965*, 286 (both works 1988) that used fictional footnotes as counter-arguments or counter-inscriptions of possible worlds.

4. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 141.

5. On the trace, touching and otherness, see Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 165: "The possibility of auto-affection manifests itself as such: it leaves a trace of itself in the world. The worldly residence of a signifier becomes impregnable. That which is written remains, and the experience of touching-touched admits the world as a third party. The exteriority of space is irreducible there. Within the general structure of auto-affection, within the giving-oneself-a-presence or a pleasure, the operation of touching-touched receives the other within the narrow gulf that separates doing from suffering. And the outside, the exposed surface of the body, signifies and marks forever the division that shapes auto-affection."

6. The artist continues, developing the idea that will influence the future course of his work in the direction of reproduction, repetition or iterability: "Further, this instability—it seems—precludes the possibility of singularity. Why? Because under the sign of trace there is an expectation, a logic of momentum or mobility which draws us, we could say, to trace that which we anticipate having revealed not once, but a thousand times—an insistence that is even *infinite* in its proportions or quantifiability—as completely invested in the necessity of repetition as it is dis-invested in the possibility of singularity." Quoted from an unpublished 2002 lecture by Ian Carr-Harris entitled "Tracing Reading Writing," n. p. All further quotations by Carr-Harris are taken from notes on work accompanying the artist's exhibitions.

7. Yet even the first type of projection might travel to another locale, such as when *137 Tecumseth* (1994), the address of the title referring to the Susan Hobbs Gallery in Toronto where the work was first exhibited, was shown subsequently in Montreal.
 "I am unable to discuss the varied issues of titles in Carr-Harris's work. Suffice it in its particular instance here to quote the artist: *Rozenstraat 8, Part 1* (1995) "rehearses the 'Nature' of address, the address addressed to itself. The representation of sunlight (an original or 'natural' projection) modified by the 'address' itself (the windows at Rozenstraat 8), constructs for us our sense of the real. To this reality we can apply with some assuredness a name: Rozenstraat 8. Yet the name itself is a mirror, as the projected light is a representation, both standing for that textual identity we call Nature."

8. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 208. The epigraph by Derrida is not fortuitous given that Carr-Harris has cited it a number of times in lectures and notes.

9. As Derrida has so often emphasized, repeated outside the work, at its edge, the title is also a scission within it, an abyssal mirror that unfounds any identity, like that of the mirror image that captivated Narcissus. The title of Carr-Harris's work *Narcissus* repeats the caption to the image of the Narcissus flower. But to what complex of references does it refer, when we glance at the text that the image illustrates: "Narcissus," a genus of plants; "Narcissus," a Greek mythological character; or "Narcissism," a psychological disorder? The title is one more repetition that enters back into the work to confound it in its infinite reproducibility.

10. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 204.

11. Derrida, "Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce," *Acts of Literature* (New York, London: Routledge, 1992), 266, 276.

12. *Ibid.*, 276.

13. Carr-Harris, "Tracing Reading Writing."

8, rue Ferrand, 2002
projection unit with motor
variable dimensions
Installation at The Power Plant, Toronto

