

## A meeting with the World

I come from North America, a place where context may be thought of differently than in Europe.

A significant motif of the making of the first “European” settlements in America was the clearing. This space stood before the domain of the unknown, the other. The two were in a relation to each other, as, in Roman settlements, there was a distinction between the city within and the world without. In America, however, otherness, unknown-ness, and the other, came to be eliminated by a matrix of conceptual, legislative and military devices.

As a consequence, within and without were rendered indistinct: there is no interior, as there is in the European city. Cities and territories in America are fundamentally different from their European counterparts; there are no public spaces in the European sense. Instead, there is equivalence, competition. Specificity is eliminated. This takes place against the backdrop of Nature: an awesome, often incomprehensible, and at one time apparently infinite Nature, subject to claims and possession.

This condition impressed itself upon me even when I was a child in the suburbs of Montréal: I understood the continental territory’s everythingness, the extensiveness of the networks of roads, railroads and flight paths over the earth, and the connections between other places around the world. And this at a time (the 1960s) when the Earth was being understood as an object, an environment, as viewed from space. I understood myself to be in a location that was at once specific, and at the same time a place with intimations, suggestions, and evocations of other places, the World, the cosmos: a conceptual settlement of almost infinite dimensions.

Our towns and their buildings and places assume certain appearances: these say something about the way things are done and thought in those places, about conventions and ways of communicating; about their fantasies of other times and other places.

This is the context of my work in art and architecture: I wish to describe an ongoing project to make specific places that are both here and elsewhere, whose specific nature is in the here and now, but, necessarily, contains ideas of other places, other people, and other times. The issue of my work is the recovery of the World for the individual’s imagination; its object is to achieve consciousness of the World and others, through the engagement of present desire, fantasy, and representation. I work in acceptance of representation; of its necessity as the vehicle toward the understanding of the World and others. I work against the condition of unconsciousness. This is difficult in architecture; so difficult that I felt some time ago that I had to leave architecture in order to pursue it. The work I have proposed contrives its own clearings in which it can see itself as representation rather than real. Through this, the real, the World, might be approached. The activated individual is jarred into consciousness of his place in this clearing, in which context appears *as representation*, through which a meeting with the World might be attempted, and even achieved.

### Beginnings

This meeting with the world takes place at the moment of beginning. One is caught between two movements: advancing towards an other does not know, or cannot possibly know; and retreating back into oneself, into that which is known. This quandary was characteristic of the founding of new settlements in North America, which proceeded first by the application of known urban models applied directly, if inappropriately, to conditions as they presented themselves; and later, by the deployment of abstract techniques projected over conditions regarded as *tabula rasa*. The former preserved the distinction between the world within and the world without that been germane to the making of settlements since at least Roman times. The latter effectively liquidated this distinction. In both cases, the planning of new settlements was a matter of making a place in the world distinct from the territory of the other. The illustration of the settlement of Savannah, Georgia (1734) in the colonial-era United States presents this method as a clear picture. The settlement exists in a clearing, surrounded by the dark forest. That forest is the domain of the other, unknown, unknowable, feared. In this case, the colonising Self considers himself endangered by the Other: the clearing separates him from the moment of confrontation, of meeting. This is an example of the application of a known urban model to an undeniable existing condition. In the great conceptual leap made in the making of places in the United States at the end of the eighteenth century, the possibility of meaningful encounter—in

which the self goes to the other and surrenders something of himself—was eliminated by the invention of a machine of territorialisation in the form of Thomas Jefferson's Land Ordinance (1785). With it, it was possible to imagine the creation of settlements in the absence of actual places. The system existed in spite of its conditions, in spite of the others that may reside there. They did not exist in this system, which projected itself—regardless of dimensions or circumstances—over the other. This machinery predicted the form of the North American space. Despite conditions and people, its arrangements were inevitable. It set up another, idealised and ideological condition in which homesteads, townships and cities grew. Within, each parcel of property as delineated by the grid found itself merely adjacent to the next, and in the atmosphere of *laissez-faire*, in competition with the other.

Perceiving the huge space of the continent from my childhood gravel pit, that space bound by the machinery of the grid was one, unified. Its inherent antagonism remained obscure to me. Instead, its *reality* was evident. Through the addition of fantasy—in my case, thoughts of ancient Egypt—came the realisation that this place was itself and also made of other places: places like it, and places unlike it. With the skein of lines drawn by railways and highways on the ground, and aircraft above, all connecting very distant places, how could it be otherwise?

The colonial settlers of the New World (a wonderful expression) addressed the new with knowledge of what had gone before, and desire for what there was to be. How could it be otherwise? They were obliged to rely upon science, the restraints and compulsions of conditions as they presented themselves, their own desire, and, inevitably, fantasy. Cities are made with the fantasies of being other cities or places: in Sixtus V's Rome, the fantasy of Imperial Rome; in Haussmann's Paris, the fantasy of Sixtus V's Rome; in Daniel Burnham's 1909 plan for Chicago, the fantasy of Haussmann's Paris. The Abbé Laugier imagined a city like a forest; Richard Neutra and Ludwig Hilberseimer imagined it like a machine. And for all such famous instances there are lesser plans, flushed with desires for other places, or nostalgia, or hope.

It is this under-acknowledged reality that provides the basis for what I do and how I think. In making photographs and films, I recognise that things and places are both what they are and what they are not; that in being tools or gestures or accommodations or arrangements, things and places embody ideas. They are subject to the characteristics of representation, and so bear both the aspirations and failures germane to representation. The making of pictures therefore requires a certain order of attention, so that one is alert to the facts that one is surrounded by as the products of conscious and unconscious representation; and alert to the predilections and predeterminations of one's own character, one's knowledge, one's fantasy. In making pictures, as in making places, one is obliged—paradoxically—to be at once as open and as knowing as possible.

In this, I have been affected by the nineteenth-century Irish-born American photographer Timothy O'Sullivan, who, after photographing the appalling waste of the Civil War in the early 1860s, participated in a number of the Great Surveys of the American West at the end of the same decade. Cast adrift in the West's vast spaces, he always acknowledged the subjects of his views—landscapes, indigenous people and their settlements—as strange to him, as other, unknowable. He permitted his subjects *to exist*, and in making his photographs, he moved toward them, conscious of himself and the distance between himself and this other. In the pictures, a meeting occurs; a fragile encounter whose particular character is evident to the viewer.

### **A picture of itself**

This is the attitude I attempt to emulate in my own work: in pictures, texts, and places. The object of this sensibility is the opening of a clearing for consciousness, for the viewers of the work of art or the photograph, or the users, the inhabitants of actual places.

I wish to make places visible—as products of consciousness and fantasy—to those people who are in daily contact with them. I wish to make works of art through which people become more conscious: of themselves, of some other, and of their meeting; and ideally, the conditions in which this meeting is situated. There are ways that this can happen: in making things *pictures of themselves*, representation is brought to the surface; the representational aspect of things becomes more evident. It is usually asked to be invisible, silent, as transparent as our own speech.

### Studiolo

In Studiolo, made in 1995, a selection of representative artefacts were sited in an art gallery. Each could be described as an art object: a painting, a sculpture, a photograph or a room, yet each was clearly dependent on adjacent works or the support of the gallery itself for its existence. Each object was weak, incomplete, and clearly a version of or a substitute for something else: a black and white painting resembled an application of silver on an adjacent wall that suggested an opening into another shimmering but uncertain world; another sculpture resembled the painting in its construction, but also a wall under construction, whose progress was apparently pictured in a large photograph right next to it, and the photograph in turn appeared to resemble the arrangement of rooms of the gallery itself, while they were under construction (it was in fact a photograph of another, generic, gallery). A sculpture on the floor resembled a well-known paradigm of sculpture and the arrangement of floor tiles of the gallery upon which it rested. In another room, the profiles of the entire space were reinforced with drawing tape, so that the room was made to resemble itself, through its enforced pictorialisation. As each artefact and situation was fragile, so was the viewer's relation to them and their situation, which was also the viewer's situation. The viewer could become part of this domain of representation, and become continuous with its tenuousness, its falseness.

### Some photographs (territories and interiors)

I have been looking for a very long time to find a place that I recognise deep within myself, a place where the World *appears*. I am looking endlessly for something that is completely undefined. People say that my photographs make everywhere look like one place. I argue the contrary: each place has its own specific ways of picturing itself and imagining itself in relation to the World. That imagination is defined by what it knows and it cannot know: the unknowable, the other. The description or explanation of the other's existence, its place, its nature, its very otherness, fires the imagination and gives the city its appearance, which compensates for its uncertainty in the face of the unknown. The city takes on all its pretensions in order to stare down that which is anathema to it. At particular moments, this confrontation has great dignity, even Beauty.

The photographs are pathetic attempts to picture these epic or miniature 'events.' They are also records of private revelations. When the World reveals itself so, even momentarily, then there is contact with something original, the *real*. At that moment, the business of language and representation is dispensed with; one has arrived at the beginning; there is an intimate, continuous relation with the World; there is no difference between the self and the other. This is the object of my practice.

### Two places: I. Place Jacques-Cartier

This project, made in collaboration with Tony Fretton in 1990, proposed a monumental surface for *Vieux-Montréal's* Place Jacques-Cartier, shaped to resemble the streets and unconscious places typical of the city's topography. The ground was conceived as a portion of the granite shield that the city stands upon, whose form emerges inadvertently in the profiles of streets and empty parking lots in the city, offering a 'psychic' landscape which people experience every day but rarely consciously acknowledge. The surface extended all the way from the *Hôtel de Ville* to the *Vieux-Port*, filling Place Jacques-Cartier's entire space, like some granite glacier. Because of the exaggerations of its sloping profile, views across the square would be impeded. It was to be as though the world, untamed, had reappeared in this city won from the wilderness. Adjacent to square, the space in front of the *Hôtel de Ville* was planted so as to be overrun with wild grasses. Beneath this field and the granite surface covering the *Place* was an enormous underground car park, in which the foundations of buildings positioned above were visible and re-clad, as monuments, in marble. The ruins of an ancient *château* covered by the *Place* were also exposed to view and to use—cars could park next to it—and the gathered ensemble were illuminated so to confuse the high- and low- cultural spaces of Montreal's 'underground city.'

### II. La scala

This work emerged in the context of a visual arts competition for a permanent art-work for a university campus plaza in Aberystwyth, Wales, on the west coast of Britain, next to the Irish Sea. The plaza, which is in public use, is high above the town, overlooking the landscape and the sea. It was designed in the late-1960s in a Brutalist style and executed in pre-cast and *in situ* concrete. The plaza is known as the *Piazza* by all, and even appears described as such on the

architects' drawings. It is surrounded by quasi-civic buildings of the University: an Arts Centre, a Library and the Student Union. An exhaust tower for the main boiler room situated beneath the Union building is known as the *Campanile*. A ten-metre wide staircase pierces the *Piazza*'s surface, descending to the rest of the University campus and the town below. The appearance of the ensemble was forlorn: very few people had stopped to enact the civic life that the architects and the heads of the University had envisaged and hoped for. Nevertheless, people stand or sit at the edge of the *Piazza* to look at the town and the sea, and there is a heroic as well as a civic character to the original architecture.

I proposed a monumental object on the *Piazza* which would act as a partner and a foil its existing components. It is a great, isolated staircase, detached from all other structures, ten metres square and six metres high. Angled towards the sea, it provides a series of terraces upon which students, staff and visitors (it is a public rather than exclusively academic place) can sit, sunbathe, talk and look at the view. During summer months, the staircase is used as an outdoor auditorium for a variety of performances. It is strongly connected visually to the foyers of the Arts Centre building; the Student Union building uses its sheltered space as a *Loggia* for eating and drinking. Arriving at the *Piazza* from above, the stair forms a monumental partnership with the *Campanile*, and appears as a strange object, at once monumental and tenuous, mute and transient. Arriving from below, the stair looms above the *Piazza*, its great steps appearing to climb to the sky.

The staircase was named in sympathy with the entire ensemble: *La scala* stands as both as a bald description of what it is, and as a conscious evocation of the fantasy of 'elsewheres' that informed the *Piazza*'s making. The *Piazza* was intended to be a great platform for observing the World, ennobled by buildings for thought, entertainment and sociability. The architects used the imagery of the classical world and the Italian Renaissance to instil a sense of nobility to those studying at this place at the edge of the World (or at the edge of Britain, at least). I wanted this idea—an existing idea—to become visible and vivid again, and real. From the *Piazza*, whose monumentality is revived, one climbs the stair in an earnest effort to be closer to the sky; to be high above the earth. I wanted people to feel as though they were suspended in the air, poised above the World, as noble—or as divine—as the architecture and landscape around them.

### **A lament: Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen**

A set of short video-films take their title from a song cycle composed by Gustav Mahler from the poems of Friedrich Rückert: *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* (I am lost to this world).

Each segment charts a course of thoughts of a fictional, un-named, un-seen character, who loses his sense of understanding of the World and his place within it. He feels isolated. In his childhood, he felt this understanding and a keen sense of belonging. The alienation which engulfs him is reflected in the forms of the world around him; in the failures of utopian, modern, promise. His quest for reconciliation with reality is the subject of each of the short films, which are proposed as a series of reflections. They are characterised by their stillness, their long shots resembling snapshots or the thoughts of a person watching.

The films were made as an exploration of the state of helplessness, of the loss of faith in the possibility of communication, of exchange, of a meeting with the World: in despair at their loss. the films constitute a lament for the loss of what is at the heart of the enterprise of the human spirit. That is, that in pursuit of the real, we must develop ways of meeting the real. Artifice; representation; language: are necessary, are human. Humanity is a matter of empathy, of consciousness.

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