

a sacrifice to the economics of space ¹

Arni Haraldsson's first show was in the mid 1980s. For this show at the Or Gallery he positioned found thrift store paintings, depicting a simulated and twisted family – including a black velvet Kenny Rogers. Another piece from around that time juxtaposed details from his Mount Pleasant house with the Vancouver Art Gallery/ courthouse building. He also published a book with Tsunami Editions, the first chapbook of the writing community known as the Kootenay School of Writing, *Metaflowers*, in which photographs of the underground/ avant-garde [Genet, Bataille, etc.] were combined with the Latin names of flowers and other text. *Metaflowers* grew out of a show of Haraldsson's at the Western Front.

In the early 90s Haraldsson began working more straightforwardly with photography, beginning with taking pictures of some super-ugly condominiums in Burnaby. This work grew to become a suite of pictures that were displayed at Presentation House gallery in 1995. In this show Haraldsson moved, in his words, from appropriation art to Duchampian ready-mades and architectural minimalism and thence to the photography of the defeated landscape. This notion of urban landscape art – what has been called “photoconceptualism” – entails in Haraldsson's case the perception of the contradictions of contemporary architecture, especially the corporate-postmodern developer vernacular. In buildings which simulate linguistically a British heritage [but nonetheless rudely scrape out a space in the wilderness, enticing with vulgar luxury], such contradictions are read not merely by showing them in their isolated ugliness, rising out of the landscape with the crude beauty of a flygirl's painted fingernail, but also through such appropriation techniques as juxtaposing excerpts from advertising doggerel.

Some of the reaction to the 1995 exhibition *Arni Haraldsson: Projects on Vancouver Architecture and Landscape* further demonstrate the resonance of Haraldsson's work, particularly for the hackles it raised with commentators both aesthetic and bourgeois. One critic bemoaned this “new

face of landscape art” – although it was not certain if she was worried more by ugly condo towers or pictures of them appearing in a gallery.² Such a concern demonstrated the lingering lack of understanding Vancouver critics have of these issues of landscape, representation, and photography. Another critic writing in *The Vancouver Sun* happily saw Haraldsson's work as simply a critique of suburban sprawl – especially, again, because the Coquitlam “neo-proletarian” [?] boxes and North Shore vistas didn't match the critic's heritage nostalgia.³ One photograph of Haraldsson's, in which roofers work [called “goofers” in the trade: hard work with a high turnover], is interpreted to suggest that the workers are oblivious to the view of a city they apparently cannot afford to live in. It is interesting to juxtapose this condescending notion with the view that the inhabitants of Haraldsson's other photographs [which show interiors of two well-known West Coast modernists, a painter and an architect] apparently possess. The problem is that, as Scott Watson commented in an essay on Roy Arden, Vancouver has always been ugly, even as it has obviously managed to sell itself and the region in terms of natural beauty and other touristic ideologies.

where this surface eclecticism is not hiding completely meaningless forms a search beneath it will always reveal this theoretical teleology and this auto-intelligibility of ideology as such ⁴

My brief narrativizing of Haraldsson's career is problematic, not least in how it presents in a linear manner his early work, work which was, in criticism of Haraldsson in the 1990s, eclipsed by a commodified relief to be *at last dealing with photography*. The relation between his work of the 1980s and his work since then might tell us some interesting things about what Haraldsson has been up to in the past decade.

The work of the 80s contains much that is familiar to us and much that has continued to interest artists: in particular, Haraldsson's juxtaposition of text and image, his disruptive collage, his interest in the found and in the low. This last category – the found and the low – remains an important subject

matter/technique for artists because of how the abject and the thrift store aesthetic have managed to resolve an apparent contradiction for artists: how to get around one's agency and how to critique bourgeois aesthetics whilst still making art.

In the context of Haraldsson's Jerusalem pictures, this taste finds itself manifested in his photos of the model of ancient Jerusalem at the Holy Land Hotel. Here taste is grounded, as the trashy aesthetic of the mini-simulacrum comes full circle and *kitsch* becomes *schmaltz*. The sublimity of the model [in a Zizekian sense of that which finally discombobulates our Being] lies in its "quality" mimicry of a conflicted place [i.e. Jerusalem's history "resolved" into its ancientness] that, small as it is, then becomes a tourist destination. This simulacra evidently has the same relation with the "actual" Israel or Jerusalem [if there is such a thing] as totem pole *kitsch* does for Canada [let alone native culture]. As national-religious fetish, the model attracts; as simulacra it does the odd postmodern-ish work of reminding visitors that they are in the actual Jerusalem ["honey, we're in it right now"]. The toy-like objects in one picture, a putty bucket and a red pillow, then do the *detournement* as well as – since they are a worker's materials as he fixes the model – provide a trace of the labour that goes into such a simulacra. At their most utopian, the pictures achieve the level of a joke, à la Freud or Lenny Bruce, humour in its modernist reversal.

What also interests us here is the question of what Althusser, describing the relation between Marx's earlier, humanist philosophies of Hegelian alienation, and his later science of dialectical and historical materialism, called an epistemological break [*coupure épistémologique*]. Althusser borrowed the term, or the idea of rupture, from Bachelard, Canguilhem and Foucault, and this idea is certainly relevant to our present discussion. So the rupture between Haraldsson's 80s work and his "straightforward" photographic practice *is already prefigured*, which is to say contained, in that earlier practice. Consider *Metaflowers*, the chapbook published by Lary Bremner's Tsunami editions in 1986:

such a fertile ground for inquiry, a beginning not merely for Haraldsson's own method of juxtaposition of image and text – which arguably reached fruition in his *Projects on Vancouver Architecture and Landscape* with its appropriation of condo ads and real estate "poetry" – but also for his interest in the ground, in the earth, that quasi-Heideggerian soil which, turned up in Port Coquitlam or fought over in Israel, negates the very history which enframes it.

*they cannot escape their history*⁵

Haraldsson's photographs of Jerusalem provide us with a dialectical reading of the city's landscape – of its historicized allegory of class as religion [unlike Vancouver's class as region [the Palestinian East Jerusalem akin to East Van] – but this project is accomplished at a brutal cost to the much-vaunted efficacy of photography and its assured audience. For what pictures like those of Lifta and Beit Hamma – with their ziggurats of terraced hills and crenellated housing, their dialectics of bleached out background and saturated pastoral foreground – what these pictures do is to stop looking like photographs and start calling to mind other modes of representation: Renaissance military-ish drawings, the American Hudson River sublime or European landscapes, 19th century lithographs. The oily texture of the Lifta photograph – complete with 100 year old Arab squats down the hill from the gentrification of slightly more grandiose residences – and the flatness of the Beit Hamma picture – the vertigo of these media-blurs then is transcoded to a more fundamental dis-ease and anxiety caused by such images and the histories they suggest.

Some politics of the urban, of the religious, of the national greening projects of Israel [which nonetheless, like early Maoist projects, retain a utopian suggestion of the collective, that important socialist aspect of Zionism, the *moshav* and the *kibbutz*], and indeed of the spectacle of the religious as commodity is necessary here, in order fully and adequately to look at such photographs; if only because the alternative is to fall into a post-millennial irony about seeing the place "where Jesus walked", etc., as if he were a Littleton stalker. But these political and aesthetic questions lead to a philosophical one: that is, the anxiety that such pictures surely raise because of how they negate the current fetish of globalization, as if such a

“world” phenomenon were usually to be seen in the *adbusters*’ vernacular of name brands and urban glitter [a condition that more properly describes Tel Aviv]. For in Haraldsson’s pictures we have a space that seems to be timeless while simultaneously historical. That is, the apparent “sameness” of Jerusalem architecture for the past 100 or 150 years make it difficult to see the time on the land or the buildings [whereas the decay of the modernist apartments in Tel Aviv becomes a free-floating sign].

The anxiety is profound, here: confronting Haraldsson’s photographs, one can only fall back on belief of some kind, ideology perhaps, to reassure oneself that one exists, that one’s time, with its virtual brandings and simulated authenticity, its tired postmodernity like the wrinkles on a superannuated NATO general [or drag queen] – that this time actually exists. For if we are not sure in looking at these pictures – the slip between painting, print, photography maintains such uncertainty – if we are not sure that our time exists [and yet history, by dint of such epistemological frames as the Covenant, or the juxtaposition of Bedhouin and Christian, does exist] we now see or feel or know that gap between time and history [does history stop just before the present?] and we then know that Being seems to be reliant on Time. Photography and architecture, then, convey the historical through the absence of signs of time.

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2000

Endnotes

- 1 Arni Runar Haraldsson, *Metaflowers*, Vancouver: Tsunami, 1986.
- 2 Robin Laurence, *Georgia Straight*, January 26, 1995.
- 3 Robyn Ward, *Vancouver Sun*, February 4, 1995.
- 4 Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, London: Verso, 1977, p. 57.
- 5 Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000, p. 399.

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