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Interview with Ian Carr-Harris

Ian Carr-Harris: *Books for a Public Library*. Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, Montréal, September 15 - October 20, 1998. La Biennale de Montréal, CIAC, August 27 - October 18, 1998

Yvonne Lammerich

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MONTREAL

INTERVIEW WITH IAN CARR-HARRIS

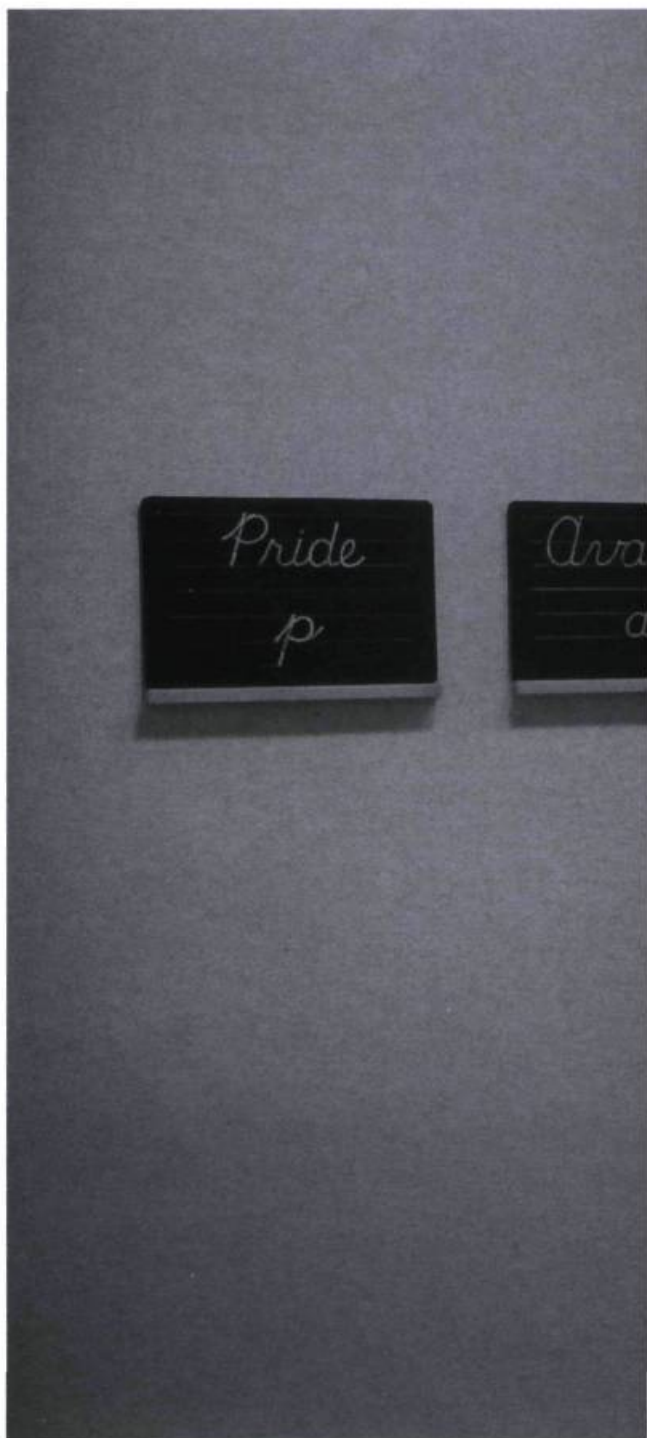
Ian Carr-Harris : *Books for a Public Library*. Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University, Montréal, September 15 - October 20, 1998. La Biennale de Montréal, CIAC, August 27 - October 18, 1998

Yvonne Lammerich : *Encyclopedias are about Foucault's words and things. We turn to them to understand our own stories. In your encyclopedias, however, it seems that the light and scripted words themselves tell a story for us, the viewer. What do these books speak to us about ?*

Ian Carr-Harris : You put your finger nicely on a paradox that is perhaps central to our current idea of art – that it should stand at the junction of challenge and response. The demand is that it be comprised of both an author and a viewer function. For myself, I have throughout my practice as an artist viewed an act of demonstration as a necessary aspect of the work. On the other hand, my interests come out of sculpture. I'm 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. So let's say the bookworks are sculptural in this sense. You ask what the bookworks are directed towards, and I've said that demonstration is important to me. I am interested, that is, in artworks having an active function, being active agents with respect to the viewer. These two modalities are not exclusive to one another, and I have employed their intersections in a number of ways in different works. In the illuminated bookworks, it is useful to draw a comparison with film. As in film, we are focused on a play of image and language; in the bookworks, our attention is held by the play between the backlit image and the word which forms the title of the work, a word which is already present in the work itself. In film, we are aware of the convention of film, of the fact that being a film, it will be a set length, and will unfold in approximately the same manner each and every time. Similarly, the bookworks are encyclopedias, and we know how encyclopedias work. We are therefore free, in both film and in these bookworks, to – in a sense – fall into them, give ourselves over to their form, you could even say pass through them. And for us to do so, each must possess both a fluid structure and a demonstrative purpose. Push – pull – a bit like vertigo.

Y. L.: *Push-pull. If you see the bookworks as illuminations, do you also see them as projections ?*

I. C.-H.: I believe Brecht and Benjamin had a discussion about rehearsing the desire of the audience. Brecht perhaps understood the play as a document, to be judged in the way we judge a document – as prose, perhaps. Benjamin's argument hinged on what was going to be gained by the audience. His interest lay in illumination – how the audience was going to be engaged. Documents don't engage us – we must engage them. It's poetry that

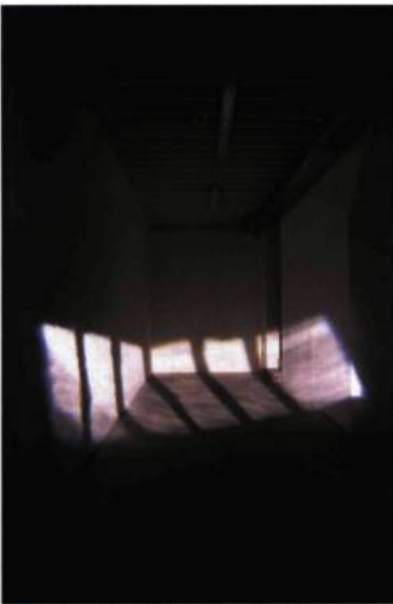




Ian Carr-Harris, *Seven Deadly Sins*, 1997. Craie et tableaux; chaque tableau: 31 x 42 cm. Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery. Photo: Isaac Applebaum.



Ian Carr-Harris, *137 Tecumseth*, 1994. (Projection # 1).
Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery. Photo: Isaac Applebaum.



Ian Carr-Harris, *137 Tecumseth*, 1994. (Projection # 2).
Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery. Photo: Isaac Applebaum.



Ian Carr-Harris, *137 Tecumseth*, 1994. (Projection # 3).
Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery. Photo: Isaac Applebaum.

engages us. The bookworks function out of their documentary status – as encyclopedias we will inevitably engage them critically as historical document. The illuminations and scripted words, however, draw us into the document, provide a means by which we can enter it and in doing so enter into the rehearsal itself. Of course, Brecht and Benjamin were after the same thing – the interesting question lies in where to situate the viewer – inside or outside the action.

Y. L.: *I'm reminded of the piece, 137 Tecumseth, that you showed in the Montreal Biennale last Fall. There seem to be parallels between that piece and the bookworks on this question of illumination and projection.*

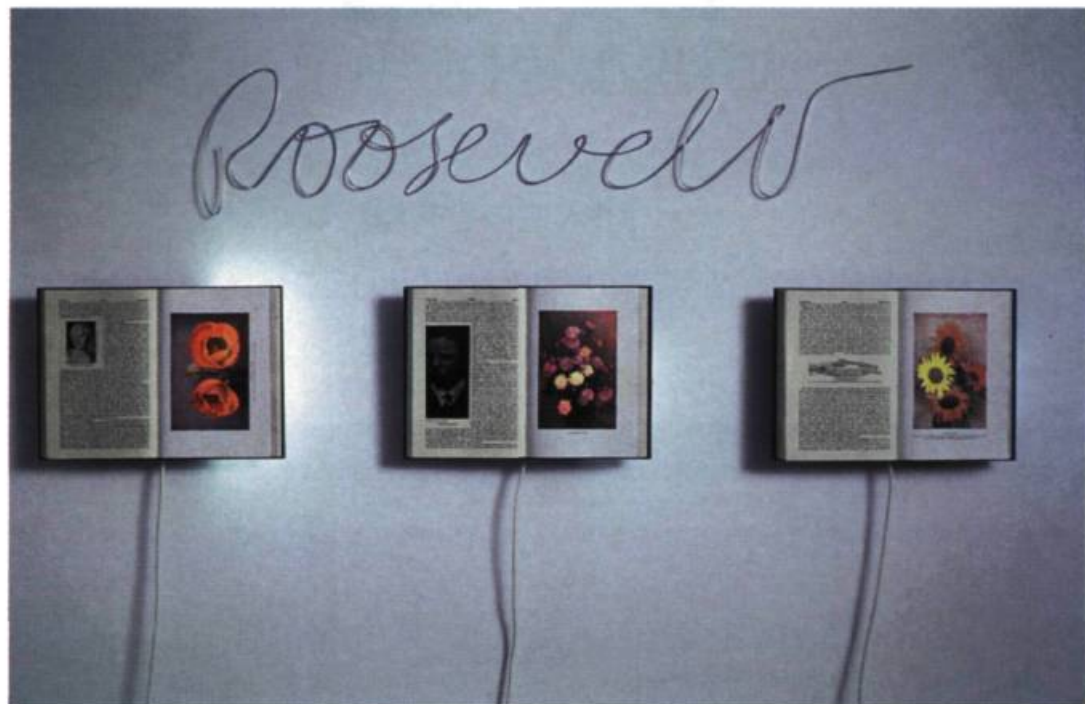
I. C.-H.: Yes, and *137 Tecumseth* employs the literal projection of light. But I think your question refers to something else. The title is an address, and the movement of the “sunlight” is out of time, so the work refers to a space and a moment other than that in which it is installed. There's a displacement of time and space, in other words, and our experience is not archaeological, we might say, but anticipatory. We are situated between tenses, and what can we do but reiterate, retrace ourselves. It's like following Ariadne's thread. We play ourselves backwards – and find ourselves unexpectedly. If I may put it this way, *137 Tecumseth* is not so much the experience of the diorama, as it is the experience of the camera obscura.

Y. L.: *In a work like Astronomy, where we have three books assembled under a single title, how do you see the intersections unfolding against that title?*

I. C.-H.: I should stress that these titles do not function as titles in the explanatory sense, but as fragments, or memories even. Consequently, the word “astronomy” is fluid – it floats or flows over the different books, as words float in our mind. I'd also like to come back to what I was earlier saying about sculpture – about its indeterminate boundaries. I think of these titles – and not just the titles, but also the backlit images – as retracings of something we already know or remember. Sculpture, like all temporal and spatial experiences, requires that we constantly retrace our path around the form in order to maintain the coherence of our experience. I don't experience, let us say, the Winged Victory, without holding in my memory as I walk around it a particular fold of the chamis or the thrust of an arm. In the bookworks, this requirement that sculpture imposes forms the basis of the demonstration, you might say. What I'm suggesting is of course applicable whether I use multiple books or single ones, except that in a work like *Astronomy* the experience is more pronounced, or extended – it's pushed. The retracing flickers through a larger tapestry. Now, it's worth pointing out that in this particular work, there is a repetition of variations on the cylinder, ellipse and circle consistent with the optics of astronomy. This repetition constructs a consistent “narrative” which permits or justifies – even in the typographical sense! – the flicker of memory.

Y. L.: *You're talking, then, not about a specific story, for instance astronomy, but of our need for narrative, however ambiguous.*

I. C.-H.: Our need for narrative is our need for words. We get caught in somewhat simple assumptions about the field that language or words can include. It includes images, as we have learned from semiotics, I guess. But I would also like to point out that these bookworks are spread open before us. Inherent within their structure as a



Ian Can-Harris, *Roosevelt*, 1995. Book, light, metal, wire; 195 x 90 x 9, 4 cm.
 Courtesy Susan Hobbs Gallery. Photo: Isaac Applebaum.

work is a history or narrative – the opening of the encyclopedia. We can – in our apprehension – retrace this act and participate in a simple narrative of address. At the same time, we are also entering into the larger narrative of knowledge – the continuing unfolding of the project of enlightenment, which is where the encyclopedia comes from.

Y. L.: *You just referred to the physicality of the book, as distinct from, for instance, the Internet version of the encyclopedia. Your bookworks are, through their materials, tied into the factuality of our physical existence. Is there a way in which you would connect the space opened up by the materiality of the one to the virtuality of the other?*

I. C.-H.: I suppose you could say that sculpture – thinking of the bookworks as sculpture – at a certain point became not an enterprise concerned with specific forms, but a formal enterprise dealing with – well, everything. It places everything in its field. We can understand everything in terms of sculptural narrative. In turn, all of these things illuminate the field itself. The point is that there is a consistent field of words and things, as you called it. It's convenient to call it sculpture. We can think in terms of formal parameters rather than simply forms.

Y. L.: *Signs, rather than symbols?*

I. C.-H.: Yes, exactly. The shift is from object to language. Or more correctly, just as symbols can also be signs, objects can also be language. Ultimately, we define these properties for ourselves, and the bookworks are about initiating this play. They are playful.

Y. L.: *You talk of retracing, and it strikes me in fact that these encyclopedias retrace a rather particular era – roughly the period between the two world wars, perhaps into the early 1940's. What significance do you attach to this era?*

I. C.-H.: If I can borrow from science fiction, I think we are always looking for the worm-hole – the secret passage into the collapse of time and space. We could also phrase this as Lyotard suggests: we want to live in the

future anterior tense. It is where anticipation, history and memory conflate. I read somewhere that this moment of collapse exists for each of us in the time just preceding our birth. It is the time-frame of our entry – the time-frame of our parents. And the inter-war period is for me precisely where the worm-hole exists, where – to coin a phrase – I experience the hyper real. I think this is – in old-fashioned terms! – the realm of the intensely intimate, perhaps in the way Lacan and Kristeva theorize it. I don't need to turn to theory, however, to know that the retracing I was talking about earlier is something I remember doing as a child in order to feel through my body the world I was experiencing. To trace is to re-enact the known so that it can become familiar. That is what these bookworks do. No doubt that is also why film is so powerful a medium, and why the period of these encyclopedias is so irresistible now. It is, after all, a period that has been made very recognizable to us – even if we were born much later than I was – by the culture industry. The inter-war period is in quite unsentimental terms a Hollywood re-make. It is now recognizable iconically. Like the U.S. flag.

Y. L.: *The flag is, of course, also an aesthetic object. Is there something about the popular aesthetics of this era that is significant for you as well?*

I. C.-H.: It is a moment when photography and painting meet in a naive collusion. A Norman Rockwell moment! By which I mean that there is a clarity and pleasure inherent in the forms that perhaps only afterwards can be appreciated – which only we, in our era, can appreciate. The crucial poignancy of the future anterior tense, you might say, is that the present can only be enjoyed as a memory from the position of the future. The aesthetics recorded in these bookworks is in this respect virtual – it exists only in conflation, like beauty.

INTERVIEW BY YVONNE LAMMERICH