

If the modern must reject the terms of this loving contract, it is because s/he recognizes in the Other a demand more profound than that expressed in the relation of subject to subject.³

...the thing is the other, the entirely other which dictates or which writes the law, a law which is not simply natural (*lex natura rerum*), but an infinitely imperious injunction...

Jacques Derrida

Doyle in her own fashion also recognizes this deeper demand, this impossibility of the loving contract's ever fulfilling itself. If her works are about the ease with which the amorous subject avails itself of its imaginary pleasures (and what else are we to understand by that *grace* of which she speaks), they are equally about the disappointment which proves pleasure's concomitant. Hence the melancholy which pervades her writing, the sad inventory of

Capable neither of a belief in the work's ability to escape the exigencies of the social contract, nor of a renewed faith in the innocence of such a contract, Doyle's texts inhabit that space we have come, perhaps too glibly, to call 'post-modern'. If the term still designates for us a space of serious investigation, it will not have been insofar as it announces some definitive end of the modern. Such an end could only prove the most naive repetition of modernism's own eschatological aspirations. Rather its value will have been in raising a question as to what would mark the 'originality' of an 'epoch', in opening the modern up to that operation by which it will always have outlived itself. It is around this moment of decay, a decadence which Jacques Derrida has rightly called 'the period proper to all movement of consciousness', that Doyle's theatre is organized. If the dream (modern-



Photos: Pamela Gawn, S.L. Simpson Gallery

wounds, of places where fulfilment has just failed to find itself:

When I looked at my neck, there were marks all up and down it. I stood in front of a mirror and came to know each mark, the depth of the colour, and was surprised how perfectly I remembered the sense of each one of them.

The manner in which the work characterizes the fact of its own representationality is correspondingly ambivalent. Alongside the appeals to a discourse of love, of grace—what Brother Martin Shea in one of Doyle's transcripts refers to as an 'appropriation of suffering'—there is a keen sense of appropriation's other face, a sense that the amorous gaze must 'grasp at the death or immobilization of the lover' (David Melnik):

At the moment I want you most, you have the least individuality, the least singularity...

I wanted Anna fixed as a magazine picture, always in the same position and sequence. I want this mental picture absolutely clear...⁴

If you can get to know it enough, you can feel comfortable with it. There's a power relationship. You're having it, dominating it.⁵

ist) of an idiom absolutely identical with itself remains the impossible referent of Doyle's 'theatre', this impossibility does not prevent it from making its force felt, from marking the specular space of the theatrical contract as a space of loss:

Thought remains, but it is just thought. Night is anxious, the broken thought of a city. I re-read this city and felt sad, as if I could never write something so beautiful again.

Andrew Payne



Notes

1. We should hesitate before ascribing to 'modernity' something like the originality of an epoch, a significance given to historical circumscription. If the modern will have resisted such a positioning, it is because that originality to which it lays claim—a claim to originality itself, to absolute rupture, revelation, to a voice whose nearness to itself would always be anterior to its having spoken itself, anterior to the distance from itself which is speech—such an originality will always never have occurred. And yet the force of this never, this less than the trivial, a *finest of the fine* as Derrida would put it, continues to leave its mark upon the question of the Book, a question to which we will have claimed some attentiveness. For the moment, a quote from Paul de Man might act as a provisional delimitation of a preface to (nor should we ignore the necessity of such an anticipation), this problem of the 'modern':

The ambivalence of writing is such that it can be considered both an act and an interpretative process that follows after an act with which it cannot coincide. As such, it both affirms and denies its own nature or specificity. Unlike the historian, the writer remains so closely involved with action that he can never free himself of the temptation to destroy whatever stands between him and his deed, especially the temporal distance that makes him dependent on an earlier past. The appeal of modernity haunts all literature. It is revealed in numberless images and emblems that appear at all periods—in the obsession with a *tabula rasa*, with new beginnings—that finds recurrent expression in all forms of writing. No true account of literary language can bypass this persistent temptation of literature to fulfill itself in a single moment. The temptation of immediacy is constitutive of a literary consciousness and has to be included in a definition of the specificity of literature.

2. All quotations from *Rate of Descent* unless otherwise indicated.

3. Gilles Deleuze in his introduction to *Venus in Furs* points to this rejection of a notion of Law based upon contractual consensus as characteristic of the modern:

Clearly THE LAW, as defined by its pure form, without substance or object or any determination whatsoever, is such that no one knows nor can know what it is. It operates without making itself known. It defines a realm of transgression where one is already guilty, and where one oversteps the bounds without knowing what they are, as in the case of Oedipus. Even guilt and punishment do not tell us what the law is, but leave it in a state of indeterminacy equalled only by the extreme specificity of the punishment. This is the world described by Kafka. The point is not to compare Kant and Kafka, but to delineate two dimensions of the modern conception of law.

4. Judith Doyle, 'Fading', from *9 Texts*.

5. *Ibid.*

Artists and cri-

tics tend to assume that meanings and intentions can be simply 'read off' a work or its description. But to ascribe to David Tomas' recent work *Behind the Eye Lies the Hand of William Henry Fox Talbot* such a univocality of intention would be to contradict the work itself. Tomas' exhibition can be understood as marking a moment of uncertainty for such a collaborative position, a position that would leave unsolicited the relation of the work and its 'criticism'. I will therefore consider in some detail the problems and issues that his work raises in order to try and draw out a few of the unchallenged assumptions of the dominant view on art and photography. If I now proceed to do that which I have prefatorially warned against—describe the work—it is because, like Tomas, I too wish to contaminate the very thing that I am dealing with. For after all, to review a work, like reading a dream, is always to try and give it a sense and place—a secondary revision that Tomas' work would seem to want to obviate, or at least to defer. But if I am to move at all, I am, despite my suspicions as regards the interest of such an operation, obliged to employ a descriptive model.

Moving in and out of the gallery is a (child's?) train on tracks: a bridge that joins the inside of the gallery to its fenestrated extremities. There are video and photographic cameras, TV screens, a strobe that flashes intermittently and mirrors that are placed on opposite sides of the gallery. A variety of texts are inscribed on the walls and mirrors and there are others on the window which can be read from the street. Historical characters and anonymous and imaginary personalities mingle freely in this dense intertextual space: on one text Mayakovsky and Vertov exchange views on the *Kino Eye*, addressing me as third term, as cinematic spectator perhaps. There are impossible meetings, not to mention readings: Fox Talbot 'sits' next to Vertov; I read about 'Talbot the man' from a text that is letraset onto one of the mirrors. This text is taken from a coffee-table book on Talbot by Gail Buckland who took an early calotype of Talbot's hand to a palmist in order to gain some insight into Talbot's personality. Here and elsewhere in the exhibition there seems to be a troubling insistence that the faith we have in our readings of images is problematic and blinding, an insistence that runs

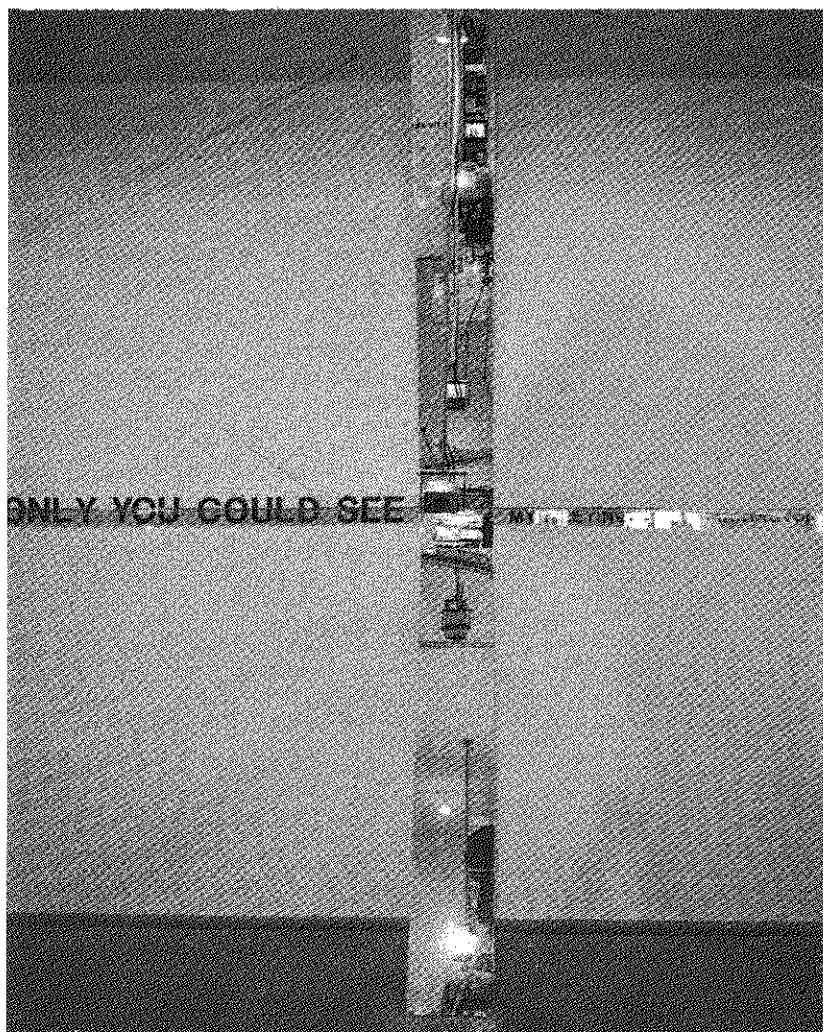


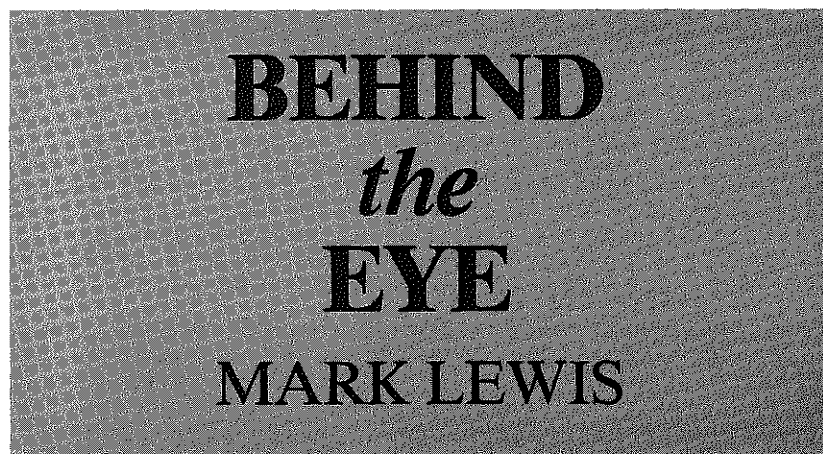
Photo: Alex Neumann, S.L. Simpson Gallery

absolutely contrary to Buckland's hermeneutical optimism (a faith in both the transparency of signifying practices and in the presence of the artist behind his or her images—hence the notion of a genius quite literally inscribed in the artist's hand.)

Tomas sits in the middle of this multi-media installation with a calotype photograph—of another palm—in his lap. The pencil that he holds in his hand marks a line on the image each time the train travels past where he is sitting. By the time that I had visited the exhibition a good deal of the image had been obscured, giving Tomas' operation the quality of an erasure. Tomas' eyes are concealed behind mirrored glasses. Behind and in front of him is the inscription: 'IF ONLY YOU COULD SEE (WHAT I HAVE SEEN) WITH YOUR EYES', a line attributed to Roy Batty, an android from the film *Blade Runner*. What seems to be suggested here is that though we see, we are in effect blinded by the familiarity of our object. Photography is normally experienced as an environment—we see it everywhere: in books, magazines, on the streets—and as such is unlike many other forms of imagery which require a conscious choice if they are to be seen. In this instance we do make a choice to see an exhibition on photography but Tomas fails to deliver the object as such; rather he presents it to us in its absence 'in a new semantic row; a row of concerns which (seemingly) belong to another category', to make, as Shlovsky would say, the familiar seem strange.

If I wish to make coherent sense of all this non-sense I quickly realize that this is an impossible desire: every time I think of something, I am forced by memory and association to think of something else, carried along vertiginous and uncontrollable routes. How else to think of Tomas' work except as a metaphor for the unconscious of art production, specifically photography! For Freud describes the dream—the 'royal road' to the unconscious—as a type of rebus where images and words mingle freely and where meaning is produced via the mechanisms of condensation and displacement.

By entering the gallery I pass a photo-electric cell and begin the train's repetitive passage across the gallery. The train's movement mimics my own as it passes another photo-electric cell starting a process that culminates in a line of erasure/covering of the calotype in Tomas' lap. The train and the calotype were developed more or less contemporaneously at a time when there were massive new productions of knowledge of the human subject. It was also a period, as Foucault has suggested, that involved a commensurate production in the forms of control and



surveillance. For Foucault, all knowledge is at once a knowledge of power and in this respect photography is no exception. We have only to consider its seminal role in the productions of the modern institution of the prison, the police and the psychiatric hospital, in order to understand how photography's claim to a truthful representation of the world is overdetermined by questions of surveillance and control.

The Panopticon—a utopian machine designed by Jeremy Bentham—is used by Foucault as a metaphor to describe the organization of gazes in the modern institutions of power. One of the interesting aspects of the Panopticon is that a subject need not actually be under surveillance in order to behave as if s/he is—the threat is enough. Tomas sits, his eyes obscured by mirrored glasses. Behind and in front of him is the inscription: 'IF ONLY YOU COULD SEE (WHAT I HAVE SEEN) WITH YOUR EYES'. Is Tomas watching me; am I watching him? The ambiguity is terrifying. We both imagine, I assume, that we are being watched and therefore behave accordingly.

There is a sense in which the work asks to be read in terms of a history of Museum works (Michael Asher, Daniel Buren et al), works that would make claim to a deconstruction of the gallery space. Certainly Tomas' exhibit performs some of the operations that have characterized this type of work: his train 'breaks through' a glass wall that separates the gallery space from the corridor and some of the texts and a video screen can be seen from the street. But for me this is the work's least interesting reading. In fact, the pretensions the work has to such a deconstruction tend to distract us from what I believe to be its more radical achievement.

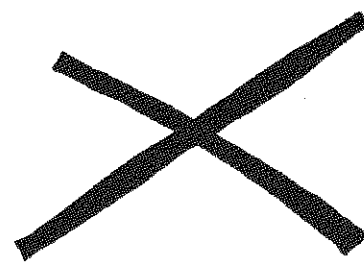
If we continue to use the metaphor of the unconscious, then the work can be understood as an attempt to locate another pleasure, a pleasure in the sense of experiencing a loss in centrality, coherence and univocal meaning. Tomas' work hints at—always partially, never conclusively—other histories of photography and art that have necessarily been repressed in order to maintain the solid-arity of the subject of western representation. These other histories can be glimpsed in those manifestations such as Vertov's radical notion of montage, Dalton's composite photographs, and in the question of alterity posed in the fictional Batty's imperative. However, they are more than just histories of 'other representations' for there is also a history that would include considerations of the relationship between photography and power, of the former's role in the emergence of the mechanisms of control, surveillance and discipline that characterize the modern state.

To move against fetishism, as Burgin reminds us, is to move 'beyond its fragments'. In other words, in order to disrupt dominant subjectivity and to produce others, it is necessary to work to undermine the 'lawfully' inscribed divisions of our culture: word and image, form and content, masculine and feminine, inside and outside, theory and practice, etc. I read Tomas's work as an attempt to negate some of those fetishisms in order to open up the art/photographic space to other histories, to other readings: readings of desire and the unconscious and readings of the social and the political, in short, readings that are no longer separate, outside and divided. In an earlier work, *Notes Towards a Photographic Practice*, Tomas repeats many times the words: 'TO BEGIN OVER AGAIN'. This statement should not be read as a myopic and humanist plea for a clean sweep of the *tabula rasa* history of photography; rather it seems to me to represent a desire to reinscribe these other histories in order to pollute and contaminate our extant subjectivity. *Behind the Eye Lies the Hand of William Henry Fox Talbot* continues and extends some of the more interesting recent work on representation that a number of artists have been undertaking—Barbara Kruger, Victor Burgin, Olivier Richon, Sherrie Levine, etc. In this respect the work can be seen at times to repeat familiar strategies whilst failing to confront the crucial problematic of sexuality, the spectre of which is raised both by the choice of objects in the exhibition—trains, electronic gadgets and, of course, the camera itself!—and also Tomas' own physical presence in the work. This would constitute another history, another reading of photography and as such could have been productively developed in the context of Tomas' project. For instance, it could be crudely argued that the camera as the quintessential voyeuristic tool is the perfected invention of masculine desire.

This quiet and thoughtful work poses the problem of the discursive formation of art and the construction of subjectivity; and this at a time when so much of the work being exhibited here in Toronto is busy recycling everything and anything at a hyperbolic rate in order to re-affirm the authority of the *salon* and the integrity of the artistic subject. Tomas' work resists the temptation to look south to the marketplace of art in order to remain very much at the heart of local production and therefore it allows us to reflect on the uncritical climate that prevails both in practice and in criticism; and herein lies its urgency.

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Dalton's composite photographs, produced at the very birth of photography, and Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, produced at a similar moment in the history of cinema, suggest that if 'dominant' production had developed along these lines of investigation and experiment, we might today be enjoying entirely different productions of subjectivity. *The Lie Behind the Eye* is above all else the repression of these subjectivities, these other histories of the artistic subject.

Thinking on art and photography has been characterized by its fetishistic quality: it lays stress on the object at hand as self-sufficient and therefore denies that there is anything lacking or absent in the visual field; and in so doing it guarantees the founding centrality of the artistic subject. The fetish is that which stands in for absence (of the Mother's imagined penis) in order to deny that absence, that lack of coherence and wholeness. Both Greenbergian Modernism and the recent affirmation in painting of the heroic artist's unique trace celebrate the fetish in order to deny the very loss that would provide the repertoire for that other pleasure which Tomas' work attempts to locate.