

FrameWork 12/24

Claire Greenshaw on Ian Carr-Harris

Pre-collapse cultural life:
Art Writing, "Toronto" 2020s

Note on this document:

This is a copy of the original paper from 2024, with updated footnotes from transcribe Xerox in 2096, and added commentary from transcribe Shanzhai at the time of this repro in 2168.

The remnants of the original are in the ancient section of the Reading Hand, in the fonds of Starter 1.

This document may have been an in-progress report of some kind. In the 2020s there were many decentralized and self-organized affiliations between artists. It is unclear what the purpose of this report was, and to whom it would have been addressed, perhaps a loose association of fellows? It remains unclear. We believe the writer is describing something they experienced IRL.

Control F

Tracings is full of replicas, repetitions and remakes. A few images hanging on the walls and a collection of books left open on tables. Not books really, sculptures of books, facsimiles. Ideas of books. Spines open. Pages fused. Unflippable. Unyielding, but legible. Unlike the Voynich¹ manuscript, that could be poured over, scanning its incomprehensible babble with tracing fingers and curious eyes, these books are closed but for the selected passages. One might imagine they possess readable interiors, like a museum with the bulk of its collection in a hidden vault. My impulse with a book is to handle it, to feel its pages flex and curve as I thumb through it, the sound of my fingers turning dry pages like legs stretching inside crisp bedsheets. Catching random flashes of language as I weigh the object in hand, deciding where to begin.

The first sculpture on the main floor, *Furnishing the Office: Rozenstraat 8, part 2, 1995* is made with a real book, though still, not one to be flipped as it has had its unseen pages glued together. It's laid open on a table below a desk lamp. A double take as I notice something uncanny about the light that illuminates the image on the page. It takes a moment to see that it is being emitted from the object itself, rather than cast down from the lamp. It creates the perfect condition for tracing. I imagine laying a thin piece of paper over the picture and getting to work with my pencil.

Tracing is a line that connects drawing and writing. Maybe reading too. In 2002 Carr-Harris gave a lecture titled *Tracing Reading Writing* in which he described a childhood memory of tracing a picture of a cartoon boat as a moment of profound discovery.² He said that to trace is “to touch the other in the extension of the self, reaching out to trace, to make a tracing, of that which exists (already) to be traced. To trace is to experience the *jouissance* of touch.” Tracing an image is to join into the process of imag(in)ing, to materially reinscribe the picture one is looking at. Tracing a text involves a suspension of language that turns all text into asemic writing temporarily by focusing on the glyph as pure form. The pleasure of tracing is to dissolve into the matrix of an image with the line of a pencil, to merge into the flow of text as reader-writer-artist.³

The backlit page presents an image of a work by Victor Burgin from 1985, *The Office at Night*, which is a photographic restaging of, and commentary on, an Edward Hopper painting of the same name from 1940. In Burgin's version, a part of the original painting is seen in the background, overlooking a woman mimicking the pose of the figure in the painting. These are presumably office workers, maybe secretaries, note-takers, pencil-pushers. They are both looking out at the viewer as they open

¹The Voynich manuscript is an illustrated codex, hand-written in an unknown script. The document has been carbon-dated to the early 15th century (1404–1438).

Strange how widespread the ancient's illiteracy was. Surprising that they couldn't read that text, given all their technological advances. The asymmetry of their knowledge is one of the most disquieting mysteries from the age of SEC. Jifke jfshjgs njj lol kksürjdhfj JK jdh Irj mnn tdr molk mksfi thx mnm0jkr nifu omg omfg

² Ian Carr-Harris. *Tracings: Writing Art, 1975-2020*, Concordia University Press, Montreal 2024.

³ See Afictionado Lobo Mews's *Do You Want to Feel Me? (2124)* for their theory of tracing and the Awake Inanimate.

the drawer of a filing cabinet. There is a rectangular section of the Burgin image that contains a simple illustration of an opened box, an isotype.⁴

The sculpture that immediately follows, *Notes, 1982-2018: Rozenstraat 8, p. 336-337, 2024*, is comprised of a table with a book, this time slightly oversized and mirroring the set-up of image and commentary in the first. In this work we see the Carr-Harris sculpture we've just walked over from documented in two photo illustrations on the lefthand page and a text describing the work on the righthand page. The text in this work explains that the isotype in the Burgin image refers to the "real" of the filing cabinet. Another double take, as I step back to confirm I am looking at a picture of the scene I was just standing in moments before. A further folding-in, an image inside an image, text inside a text, only this time it has moved into the world of objects and my own body and spectatorship is entangled now.

What happens when an artist remakes their own work? Retracing one's steps, visiting the past and retrieving a part of it. Moving back and forth in the catalogue of his works, the artist playfully interrupts their chronology by weaving new lines of thought and material doublings, making an in-between of the works leapt across. If Carr-Harris's collected artworks were a single tome, these moves would create intertextual footnotes. This might be the thesis for this exhibition— each sculpture is comprised of a "book" that opens to a section from *Tracings: Writing Art, 1975-2020* (2024), his recently published collected writings. Here is a materialized constellation of his written output. A web of citations. A reading list.

A work remade has a tailing, a shadow cast from and into another context. A copy leaves a trail of footprints to find our way back to the source.

I am travelling back to Susan Hobbs with Brendan and Ella. We are discussing my dissertation and whether it's necessary to hand letter the manuscript. Will there be computers⁵ in the Reading Hand?⁶

⁴An Isotype (International System of Typographic Picture Education) is a simple pictorial system for communicating complex ideas invented by Otto Neurath. Together with wife and collaborator, graphic designer Marie Neurath, he established the Isotype institute in 1942. After his death Marie Neurath published a series of non-fiction children's books that developed their ideas about learning, communication and isotypes. *If you could see inside*, is one in the series. For this title Marie dispensed with Otto's concept of the isotype as a pictorial container or box after deeming it too complex for children and instead employed cross-section illustrations of everyday objects to demonstrate their inner structure and how they work. It's interesting to think of this series in relation to Carr-Harris' closed books which might operate as isotypes themselves.

⁵Ancient communication technology. There are currently 3 fully intact computers preserved in the Relics section of the Reading Hand. Many of these were deconstructed and stripped for their materials during the Peeling era that preceded the Pickering Melt.

⁶This is the earliest known mention of the Reading Hand among the Starter's documents in the ancient section of the archive, which strangely, predates the collapse. It is believed that the idea for the Reading Hand was conceived pre-collapse as possible storyline for a work of fiction. Looking back, we can see this was an early hyperstitional seed.

Ella mentions that it might be helpful to either create a typeface or use a form of text that is legible to a script-reading technology⁷ so the committee can search the document if they want to.

Search the document? How? I say. You know, like Control F they reply. I draw a blank and ask What's Control F? There's a pause and they exchange a puzzled look. They are both laughing and incredulous. I'm blushing in the back seat. A brain-melting conversation ensues. Apparently, everyone knows about and uses Control F.

It's disorienting to discover gaps in basic knowledge about how common tools work. It reminds me of being convinced as a child that actors physically shrank themselves down so that their tiny bodies could travel via the electrical cables into my television where they performed on a miniature stage behind the screen. Learning about Control F feels like discovering I've been mispronouncing a common name for years. Or an unintentional time separatist, marooned in some fractal future.⁸

Control F sounds something like googling. I romanticize browsing in-person in a library, assume it allows for more improvisation and chance encounters than an algorithm, but that's too simplistic. Algorithms are full of misalignments and strange relations. The absurd poetry of autocorrect.¹⁰ The architecture of a library, the system of its stacks and catalogue are choreographic devices that channel us through a collection. Control F is not dissimilar from the Dewey decimal system. I wonder, will that system become one of the ghosts of AI, like the phonebook or paper maps?¹¹ I used to know the Dewey decimal system so well that I could guess the precise subject of the book based on the call number when I worked as a student page at the local library. That was my first job, and the bulk of my labour involved countless hours of shelf reading. When I try to recall anything of

⁷ We believe the people of SEC had devices that could 'read' texts on their behalf, it is unclear if this was to make language audible or to somehow transfer the content into their consciousness. It is believed that this was a widely available tool pre-collapse.

⁸ Is this a reference to Risky's Qalqalah? See Risky, "Qalqalah: The Subject of Language" in the SI collection of the Reading Hand. This is a work of speculative fiction written in 2015 by scholar Sarah Risky. It is a very brief short story about a linguist called Qalqalah who lives in the year 2048 in a community called UAW, which stands for United Arab World and is a conglomerate of regional corporations that order social and political life. In UAW, people born after 2000 have a different experience of memory, where the past is less available. It is presumed that this was a critique or commentary about the way that the world of SEC was shaping people's understanding of time and history in the hypermediated flow of information. In the story, Risky mentions time separatists and idealists who had tried to extract themselves from the system.

⁹ A finding tool used in the virtual realm of the digital pre-collapse era.

¹⁰ This is obscure, perhaps another finding tool or an ancient idiom?

¹¹ AI stands for Artificial Intelligence. There was a rapid development of this technology in the 2020s and many have speculated about its involvement in the events that lead to the collapse and its subsequent disappearance. It is still unclear if this was simply a tool of SEC society or if it became a non-human being. No trace of it has been detected in the tangible world as it fails (or refuses) to animate its ancient vessels.

that indexical knowledge all my brain burps up is something around the 599s and an image of a book about vampire bats.

There are more unsearchable books upstairs. These are again oversized and open in the same closed way. There are two tables, this time each contain a pair of books placed side by side. If these artworks were the results of a Control F through Carr-Harris's work what would the keyword be?

The first table displays two books. In one book there's a text about innocence and cheekiness in the work of Johanna Householder. This layout also shows an astronaut improbably floating out of a washing machine door. In the second book I see the last page of an essay about the work of Margarita Andreu from 2004. Something about Plato's cave and language and doubt. Something, something... a curtain parting to reveal how stories constitute projections of freedom. The facing page contains a picture of a painting of a figure with an upraised pinky finger and the beginning of an essay entitled Staging Painting in the work of Ulrike Nattermüller (2000).

The second table contains another set of books. In the first, an interview with artist Anique Jordan that begins with a discussion about historic timelines and survival and identity. There is an image of the artist's photographic work, *To Score the Marvellous* (2022), which involves a group of photographs of repeated figure, in each print, a different posture. The other book includes an image of a work from 1973 that depicts a medieval portrait of the Queen of England and an irreverent and vaguely menacing 16th century popular rhyme.

What is the ordering principle that unites these passages? An endless complexity of associations bubbles up. Along with the isotype, Otto Neurath is well known for creating a simile about knowledge as a boat that must be continuously repaired at sea. In 1913 he wrote:

We are like sailors who on the open sea must reconstruct their ship but are never able to start afresh from the bottom. Where a beam is taken away a new one must at once be put there, and for this the rest of the ship is used as support. In this way, by using the old beams and driftwood the ship can be shaped entirely anew, but only by gradual reconstruction.¹²

Reproducing his own writing as sculpture, Carr-Harris turns these texts into props which make the visitors to the gallery into performers of a reading tableau. A living picture that continuously traces itself across time.

¹² Otto Neurath "Anti-Spengler" in *Empiricism and Sociology*, Neurath, M., Cohen, R.S. (eds). Vienna Circle Collection, vol 1. Springer, Dordrecht. 1973. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-2525-6_6