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Physicality, Transgression and the Tendentious. Subject: Ian Carr-Harris at the AGO

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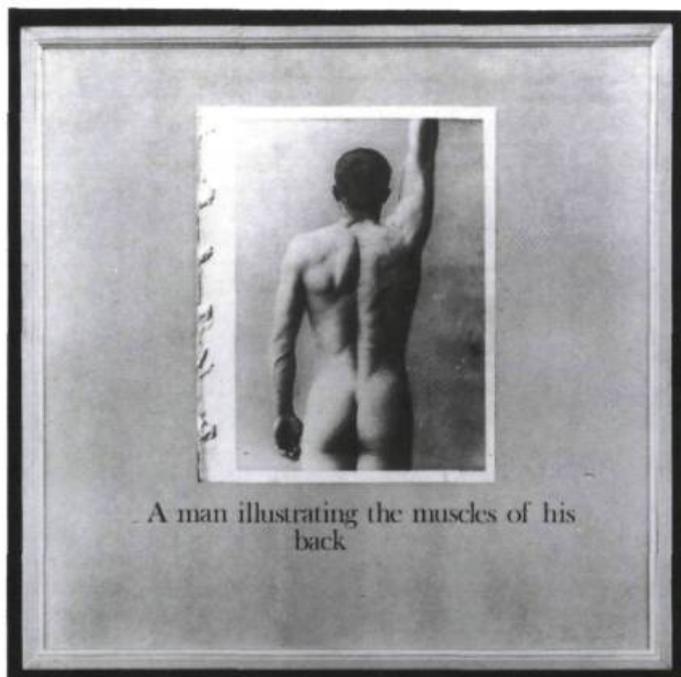
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Physicality, Transgression and the Tendentious Subject : Ian Carr-Harris at the AGO



A man illustrating the muscles of his back

Ian Carr-Harris, *A man illustrating*, 1973.
Framed tinted photographs, leterset; 60.8 x 60.8 each.
Collection of Carmen Lamanna

Ian Carr-Harris, Art Gallery of Ontario,
November 12, 1988 to February 5, 1989 —

Cogito, ergo sum, *ubi cogito, ibi sum.*
Jacques Lacan

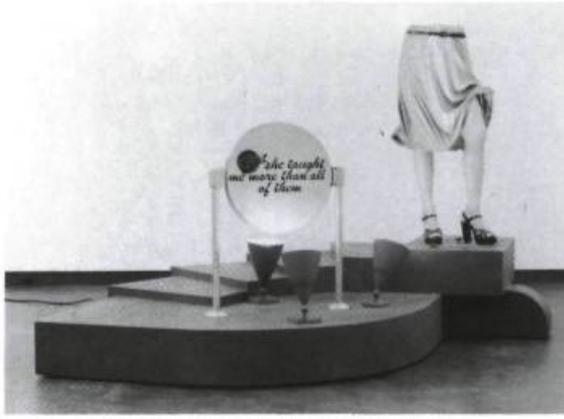
AGO curator Philip Monk has successfully performed what must be judged as a consummately difficult archaeological dig in this exhibition: disinterring and reconstructing critical works by Toronto artist Ian Carr-Harris from the historical strata in which they have been sedimented for the last 10-15 years — and, in the process, reprising for the public work as radical and convincing today as when it was first executed.

Monk's concern for the work's history of reception/non-reception in the splendid accompanying catalogue seems as salutary as it does necessary. In order to "recover" the works in question, he takes as his methodological focus the problem of "writing" history. The curator/interpreter justifies his approach at the outset as follows: "This approach is appropriate in that these works... take as their subject the very constitution of history and reality as a means of establishing identities. It sets itself the problems that the works put in place for themselves. Whether we approach these objects now or

then, they are part of our interpretative process."¹

It seems somehow apt — and even elegant — that Monk should decide to reprint a seminal essay he wrote on the work in 1983, entitled "Staging Language, Presenting Events, Representing History", in the catalogue. In any case, he is absolutely dead-on in pointing out that the works in question are, ineluctably, part and parcel of the whole process of interpretation itself. Indeed, from this interpreter's standpoint, the principal focus of Ian Carr-Harris' work is how the tendentious subject structures his/her identity, the poetics of transgression often involved in or contingent upon that structuring in a societal framework, and the chiasmic intersection of signs that expresses same and which is at the crux of these subversive constructions.

Monk discusses the fetishistic character of Carr-Harris' production in terms which seem exactly right. He draws our attention to the fact that Carr-Harris "gives us things and situations themselves in all their fetishistic reality". Specifically, in *If you know what I mean*, 1977, and *But she taught me more*, 1977, Carr-



Ian Carr-Harris, *But she taught me more*, 1977.
Metal, painted wood, fibreglass mannequin, clothing, spotlights,
motor; 162 x 262 x 154 cm. Collection of Carmen Lamanna

Harris treats of the so-called “fetish” of the female body presented in *absentia*, through a trace of clothing. In the very titles of these pieces, Harris explicitly focusses on what has been called the “taboo-laden” overlap between high and low discourse, and broaches the problem of transgressive symbolic domains. One also infers that integral to the very *structure* of his work, as Jacques Lacan stressed in the context of psychoanalysis and which Monk stresses here, is the *inmixing of an Otherness*.²

Furthermore, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have said: “...transgressive symbolic domains and the fetishism which attaches to them are never merely diversionary. There is no simple fit between the imaginary repertoire of transgressive desire and economic and political contradictions in the social formation, and yet the two are always deeply connected.”³

Ian Carr-Harris, the practising artist, is always aware of the phenomenal interconnection between this imaginary repertoire and the social contrariety of which he treats and he attempts to give it concrete or, rather, metaphorical form in the articulating medium of his constructions. He also succeeds in demonstrating just how deeply entwined are alterity and women’s sexuality in Western society. As Monk says: “Specifically, absolute otherness (which is also an other lacking a history, a being maintained in its otherness by a denial of that history) was posed in terms of women’s sexuality, a place where the issues of identity and physicality found their logical (for our society) form. With these 1977 works Ian Carr-Harris reached the radical (for a man) question of identity by addressing what has since come to be known as the “other” through a societal definition based on women’s sexuality.”⁴ In this passage Monk identifies a rather spectacular (for the time) accomplishment on Carr-Harris’ part, which is precisely his singular apprehension and ironic undermining of *alterity* as conceived according to that definition grounded in *feminine sexuality*.

Of course, in this as in other issues of content, one could take all this one very significant step further and claim that, in so doing, Carr-Harris, in the actual structuring of his work, is superimposing similarity processes on contiguity processes or, better yet, *simply observing similarity processes as being self-present*. However, as several commentators have pointed out, it is really inconsequential as to whether it is the former or latter case since the bare fact that the similarities in

question are activated at all indicates the tendentiousness of the subject — and the operation of a wishful ego.⁵ Carr-Harris lets us all know, tongue-in-cheek, that he is just as much the tendentious subject as the spectator himself is, even if he is an insider (read: artmaker) and we are not. And, in the process, he reveals quite a lot about repression and fetishism in society.

Of overwhelming importance in this work is the fact that it always points to our physicality, as Monk amply demonstrates, and reveals the artist’s attempts to *think* the body itself in a novel way. His conception of the body is synonymous with social topography. Ian Carr-Harris’ work is important in that he posits the body as something that cannot be *thought* separately from the social formation, symbolic topography and, for that matter, the constitution of the subject. As Stallybrass and White point out: “The body is neither a purely natural given nor is it merely a textual metaphor, it is a privileged operator for the transcoding of these other areas. Thinking the body is thinking social topography and vice versa.”⁶

Indeed, it is often by pointing up the apparent dissociation between the two — while using fetishism as a foil against itself so as to prevent it from infecting the attempt to “think” the body in an adequate manner — that artist Carr-Harris and interpreter Monk most effectively demonstrate the status of this dissociation as being equally apparent, by implication, as an ideological manoeuvre in most contemporary critical discourse as in the history of low and high discourse generally and, furthermore, in the wider context of social transgression of which this whole exhibition treats and the history of reception/non-reception that the accompanying catalogue traces out.

James D. Campbell

NOTES

1. Philip Monk, *Ian Carr-Harris, 1971-1977*, Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, 1988, p. 6
2. See Jacques Lacan, “Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever” in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, edited by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972, pp. 186-195
3. Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986, p. 26
4. Monk, *op. cit.*, p. 59
5. Daniel Laferriere, *Sign and Subject: Semiotic and Psychoanalytic Investigations into Poetry*, Studies in Semiotics, Vol. 14, edited by Thomas A. Sebeok, Lisse: The Peter de Ridder Press, 1978, p. 63
6. Stallybrass & White, *op. cit.*, p. 192