

ALWAYS GREENER

an Intercontinental Collaboration by Gabrielle Jennings and Anne Wilson

8 May - 8 June 2000

Platform 2, Flinders Street Station, Degraeves Street Entrance, Melbourne

MELBOURNE, ALWAYS GREENER

"For what else is your metaphor," George Puttenham asked over 400 years ago, "but an inversion of sense by transport, your allegory by a duplicity of meaning or dissimulation under covert and dark intentions?" Both in the structure of the Jennings and Wilson's video installation and in the images shown by each video, the most compelling trope is "transport" — the very essence of figures of speech, indeed, of language itself. A metaphor transports us from one idea to another just as language transports us from word to thing or word to concept. But as Plato knew (and was deeply troubled by), not to mention Biblical literalists past and present, metaphorical language — sense by transport — is a double-edged sword: it can take us directly to our destination or leave us stranded en route. The same may be said of representation itself: it either secures the presence of its referent or signifies its absence. As Barthes' observed in relation to Mallarme's poetry: "The sentence, the word, is a way of murdering the world." The very essence of language and representation is their capacity to "dissimulate," to invert sense by transport, to exist uneasily in the space between presence and absence, always in pursuit of meaning, promising a consummation that may never come.

All of this seems to me crucially important to Always Greener, which articulates the promises and failures of transport on several levels. The very condition of the installation is that each artist has transported her vision to the opposite side of the world; each is looking through the perspective of the other as if she were present at the scene itself. In the same way, the viewer is also transported from Los Angeles to Melbourne (or vice-versa), asked to see one city from the point of view of the other. But if this were all the installation accomplished, it would be little more than a tourist film of two "sister cities." Instead, along with sorority we get sororicide, presence as well as absence, an insistence of the space in between — the space of transport itself. Thus the two videos are as much consolidated as confrontational: they mark opposition and similarity at the same time. Viewers literally stand in a place in between, embodying the gap between the two cities and between the artists' visions; there is no available point of view from which one can see both videos at once, and yet they are shown simultaneously.

Perhaps this is the very essence of technology — at least technologies of transport. They promote communication but are the source of our separation in the first place: we fly across the ocean to visit a lover who wouldn't be there if airplanes hadn't been invented; we talk on the same telephone that allows us to live apart; we receive a letter that connects us yet signifies the distance between us. Unity and dislocation, community and

loneliness — these themes are simultaneously evoked in the latent structure of the installation, and in its manifest content as well.

Thus the content of the two videos persistently occupies the space in between presence and absence — the space of desire — by giving transport without arrival. The Los Angeles cityscape remembered by Anne Scott Wilson and shot by Gabrielle Jennings begins with a sun-bleached street scene, shot conspicuously from behind a Federal Express truck (again, transport), passes a dilapidated beauty parlor that seems hopelessly out of date, then takes us inside a diner that might be found in any part of America's vast network of urban sprawl. The too bright interior reveals a few patrons as empty as the diner itself. And the streetscape captures a sun-bleached intersection where life seems to plod along in a sequence of empty, secular rituals: cars slow down at the intersection, stop, then proceed in numbing repetition, and pedestrians trudge along with purposeless purpose, seemingly without origin or destination. Finally, the camera returns to its starting point, establishing a circularity that underscores the pointlessness of the street corner and the lives that inhabit it — all this endorsed by the "white noise" of constant traffic.

Circularity also governs the video remembered by Jennings and shot by Wilson, where the camera revolves around the four windowed sides (its images made painterly by the pseudo-Art Deco frames) of a Melbourne restaurant overlooking an enclosed harbor and, on one side, an expanse of sea. The boats are moored in stillness and serenity, but the ocean promises movement and travel; similar to the Los Angeles scene, transport is evoked but held in abeyance. The ephemeral beauty of the sunset (juxtaposed nicely against the beauty parlor in Los Angeles) begins to create a wistful effect as the images are repeated and the sun continues its descent: we are viewing a splendid sunset in its final moment. This idea of haunting absence is corroborated in the music we hear: old songs evoking another era, the first of which carries the forlorn title, "Good-bye." Even more, the music comes with the animated chatter of bar patrons we cannot see, as if the empty restaurant were remembering a more glorious era that won't be recovered. Like our nostalgia for the past, the other place is "always greener" than the one we inhabit — presence haunted by absence, contentment outstripped by desire.

Jennings and Wilson transport us from one city to the other through their own remembrances of things past, asking us to see across the hemispheres from the other's perspective, through an artistic medium that must always stand in some relation to its progenitors, television and film. These popular media are among other things false prophets of intercultural empathy, often presenting not shared experiences of cultural difference but rather one-sided (mis)representations that flatten out difference into a Baudrillardian dystopia of sameness and repetition. Always Greener doesn't embrace this vision, but it resides uneasily between it and the optimistic promise of technology to open up the world — neither here nor there, but always in transport.

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ALWAYS GREENER, LOS ANGELES

If there is a competition for which city is greener in the collaboration between Anne Wilson and Gabrielle Jennings then Melbourne would win hands down. Wilson's panoramic depiction of a disused cafe on the end of a pier at St. Kilda captures a picturesque beauty reminiscent of Constable's paintings. Seagulls soar past and disappear into the horizon as dusk envelopes this popular seaside suburb on Port Philip Bay. Jennings' video of Los Angeles on the other hand is the antithesis of rustic landscape charm. It is a gritty mapping out of an urban landscape that surrounds Johnnie's diner, the ubiquitous joe-everybody burger joint. The only greenery evident here is the slice of squashed lettuce that is slowly drowning in ketchup while lying suspended under one pound beef patties. That, and the astro turf that the manager has installed out the back to stop the kitchen hands from breaking their necks, is all that could technically be called green about the place. The rest is gray with fluorescent touches in a Vaseline haze constructed out of gasoline fumes.

No doubt about it Melbourne is greener and we Melbournians can all celebrate its title as the garden city of Australia and rest on our laurels that even though we are at least five times smaller with no equivalent to luscious Malibu, life is greener here than in the City of Angels. Granted, both centres love their lawn, but it is much harder to squeeze it into the vacant slivers of land in Los Angeles than it is in Melbourne. As a result, all the rhetoric about LA's tropical fecundity collapses under the weight of a greater fixation for concrete than for nature. Green symbolism ends up triumphing over a green reality with mini golf courses ultimately functioning as the leading providers of ersatz nature experiences.

Such a glib comparison as this might be justifiable if we took the exhibition title literally and compared the quality and amount of lawn in each respective city. This after all is what is meant by the cliché of the grass being greener in the Jones place next door. Yet the title playfully subverts this suburban adage by offering a comparison of two vastly different metropolises. Jennings (LA) and Wilson (Melbourne) have constructed a dialogue between both cities predicated on their reminiscences of each other's place of residence. What is green -figuratively speaking- for Jennings about Melbourne is its literal greenness, its tranquillity or exotic charm. What is green about LA for Wilson is its urban vernacular of car culture and 50's style junk food palaces.

While this type of exchange may be interesting in its own right, a simple comparison of my place is different from yours only succeeds in playing out conventional ideas about international dialogue. Where Always Greener furthers the idea of exchange is that Wilson and Jennings are employing each other to document the significant locations chosen. They are having to anticipate the site's appeal; the ambiance, view or freshness of the burger buns, while at the same time locating these things within their own visual arts practice centred around video. A certain tension is thus set up from the outset whereby notions of memory, and holiday bliss intercede with a disinterested examination of site.

The relationship, or more accurately non-relationship, between the poetry of reminiscence and the logic of empirical documentation of place is the basis of Always Greener. This later point is interesting for the fact that both artists have chosen a similar conceptual language for their final documentation. Both rational and deadpan, their mapping of the diner and cafe respectively is reminiscent of the strategies of 70's conceptualism.

Wilson has sat a tripod in the middle of the cafe floor and simply rotated it for ten minutes. Our experience of site is built up through panoramic repetition and the subtle changes taking place in the landscape over that time. The only expressive gesture is the varying rotational speed that becomes more random as the artist begins to tire from the process of turning the tripod. An overall effect of slow vertigo is built up with the camera continually surveying the locality revealing a mixture of sea and beach front buildings. By constantly moving however, our desire to comprehend the location is frustrated. It is only through the repetition of surveillance that we gradually build up our knowledge of the environment. As the sameness is multiplied over time, small details appear such as the fact that we cannot see the pier that leads to land. Wilson ultimately exaggerates the tourist's experience of the site by continually playing out the panorama and therefore not allowing it to be a comfortable experience of contemplation. This is magnified by the fact that the cafe is being renovated and there is nothing in the building to give it a sense of purpose or indeed atmosphere.

Jennings on the other hand, has filmed the diner from the position of somebody approaching Johnnie's on foot. Her ten minute body-cam footage starts and ends at the same point which is a location a few minutes away. Unlike Wilson's methodical vertigo, Jennings utilizes the rhetorical concept of chiasmus in her construction of space. The journey proceeds to a point and then we retrace the steps back as if we have navigated a cul-de-sac. There is a fluidity and logic to this process yet one that is disrupted by the subtle differences observed in going forwards and backwards. The whole procession is determined not by an attempt to find something in the diner of interest, but to work to the strictures of a fixed 10 minute duration. As a result, what happens along the way is mostly incidental to the process of defining the site in terms of duration and repetition. Johnnie's becomes a fast food joint that functions as little more than a backdrop to a taxonomic journey. This journey is about structure in the form of time and space and the ways in which this order is challenged by chance and the imperfections of the human body. Who we meet, the traffic negotiated, and other external factors modifies the project as does Jennings' movements which do not run to clockwork and are often shaky and imprecise.

While both videos are not crisply made and are subject to the wobbly body as tripod syndrome, there is a general subservience of gesture to process in both works. This highlights the interest Jennings and Wilson have in ideational based practice. A litany of conceptualist conventions are played out that place structure ahead of expression. There is little chance involved except in the factors external to the videoing process such as people encountered and weather as all decisions are made prior to filming. There is no attempt to embellish either site. There is minimal human presence, no laughter, or

incredulity at the size of the sodas. There is also no one there to share the experience with as might have been the case in the original encounters.

By framing the sites in these terms, a curious duality is set up that pits conceptual rigour against personal pleasure. We know that the locations have an appeal because Jennings and Wilson tell us so, yet how can this be conveyed through the decidedly cool processes employed by both artists? In other words has the pleasure principal been sacrificed for the canon of conceptualism? A case could be made that in the process of being documented, the mystical elements of Johnnie's and the Pier Cafe are dissolved. That through the strictures of anti-expressivity we are witnessing an emptying of the charisma of place whereby the sites become greyer rather than greener. Certainly the emphasis on repetition and continual movement in Wilson's work exhausts the possibility of framing a coherent experience. Similarly, Jennings gives us tourism on the run where there is no time to stop and smell the coffee.

While to some degree the aura of these places is consciously being undermined, both videos exceed the hyper-rationality of Conceptual art. This is because there is a concerted attempt on the artist's behalf to define the curated premise around the nexus of feeling/emotion and its relationship to architectural site. They are up front about feeling a certain wonderment for the exotic other and that they have invested something of themselves in these sites. This premise of identity invested in architecture is clearly distinct from most 70's concept art which aimed for (though never achieved) a site neutrality. What is revealed is the contingent nature of meaning in relation to location and that iterability is clearly limited by difference whether it be personal, cultural, or geographical. Stated simply, some things do not translate and a location's appeal is clearly located in the eye and bodily experience of the beholder. The artists' attempts to reframe or restage the site through the eyes of each other succeeds in interesting ways in revealing this.

The tourist gaze may be a potent vehicle for imbuing meaning but its resonance and longevity are challenged by the artists' usage of certain conceptually based strategies. These ultimately create a dialogue surrounding the relationship between the virtual and real bodies and in particular certain irresolvable differences between them. Perhaps the overarching aim of Always Greener is to test the limits of memory as it is framed through the virtual and in the process see if beauty can survive being reformulated in a disinterested language. The answer in this project seems to be a very interesting maybe.

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