

Nelson Henricks: Map of the City by Donna Wawzonek

“As a building is a book as a book is a building.” A video as a book, a room as a city, a city as a body and a stranger as a door: *Map of the City*, a new work by Nelson Henricks presents a series of metaphors to consider the memories, geographies and meanings of cities.

Map of the City introduces itself as cinema. Two synchronized videos are projected side by side in the darkened Media Gallery depicting images of theatre seating. Yet it is an installation nonetheless and the work is constructed in sections or ‘chapters’ and in a cyclical manner so that the viewers can watch only a segment or commit themselves to viewing the entire work. As the opening title plays on twinned images, it is clear that what we are watching is a cinematic metaphor for a book, and the book as a building and the building as a city. It is cinema as a book, each projection reading as a ‘page.’ This technique moves away from the traditional single channel cinematic approach and allows the artist to work linearly (one image after another) and also laterally (considering the adjacent images in relation to one another.)

Henricks’ method of production for *Map of the City* is similar to his earlier works such as *Untitled (Score)*. It is both laborious and complex, capturing thousands of photographs and video clips and meticulously pairing them with text, synchronizing each ‘page’ to form a single seamless image across the projected space. The imagery and the concept were developed at a residency in Rome and the work was compiled at P.R.I.M. in Montreal. Thus working in an old city and a new world one, the imagery is well suited to the consideration of temporal, historical, cultural and personal mapping.

The introduction to this ‘book’ opens in a frenzy of images of relics. Stone maps, plans of rooms, buildings, streets and cities and tablets of text flicker past like puzzle pieces with no sense of order or relationship.

My body gives off heat and light dim and flickering in
slow motion. If you could see my life from beginning
to end in a single motionless line it would glow like
neon tubing snaking through the houses and rooms
where I have lived.

Throughout the work Henricks uses a variety of cinematic techniques to represent the passage of time. The movement of the images on the screen, the movement of the camera in relation to still images, the objects as symbols of time themselves, everything about *Map of the City* is in constant motion. Even the apparently still images of text set against bright monochromatic backgrounds undulate in shadow and light in rhythm with the austere mechanical soundtrack.

The city resembles one great sprawling citizen.

Matching images of Roman statuary are paired on the projections. Unlike Greek statuary that attempts to represent the ideal, Roman sculptures are portraits of individuals. As the sculptures flash past, focusing on eyes, lips, ears, nose, it is clear that they are all distinctly individual.

Each citizen represents the city in miniature.

As each citizen is distinct, so is each body and the buildings, rooms and cities they inhabit. Henricks also uses the idea of the individual citizen as a unique doorway, entrance or understanding of a place.

Each person you meet is a possible point of entry.
Each person leads to a dozen more. Choose that first
face carefully. Find the right gate to the city.

In this way Henricks considers the idea that a single place can have multiple meanings, these meanings dependent on who introduces it to you or which path you choose. The notion of unfixed meanings is developed in other ways in this work.

The next chapter is a barrage of objects, trinkets, watches, keys match books and game pieces. "Meaningless!" the text proclaims, and to the viewer it is. No context is given to these works until text begins to appear in tandem. All images and objects in *Map of the City* are given equal weight, yet many of them hold personal meaning for the artist. The objects twitch and rotate on bright yellow, red, green and blue backgrounds. Now the work is like a children's picture book, with the text informing the meaning of the objects:

Coins – "What does one gain"
A chain link – "from all this labour"

The objects may have meanings brought to them by the viewer or culturally implied, yet once the artist has applied meaning to the objects these meanings become fixed and remain with the objects when they are reintroduced later on in the video.

Henricks also considers the process by which he has created the work:

After the end of everything I am here in this room
cataloguing images. Millions of images each one
crying out for attention. I take care of them. I copy and
file them. I give them life.

This text is paired with photos of a newborn baby. Throughout the video Henricks uses photographs that suggest a personal family history. Henricks may be applying meaning to his imagery but he does not reveal everything.

Although Henricks develops a view of the city, of history and of society as complex, distinct, personal and ever changing, his world-view could be considered nihilistic, or as he refers to it as “bleak and existential.” Or perhaps he is leaving the ultimate interpretation of his work as open-ended.

There is nothing new under the sun.

(Yet he claims our meanings of those things are unfixed and ever changing)

There is no memory of the people of old

(Yet Henricks still attempts to find meaning in what they have left us.)

Enjoy your life with those you love. All these days of this meaningless life that have been given to you under the sun.

In the end, Henricks brings us back to the cinema, out of the work and into the space inhabited by the viewer. One room in one city at one time in history.