

L U M I N O U S

IOLE ALESSANDRINI

JAMES CARL

DAN FLAVIN

RODNEY GRAHAM

MORRIS GRAVES

JOSEPH KOSUTH

TOKIHIRO SATO

JULIANNE SWARTZ

HAP TIVEY

MARK TOBEY

BILL VIOLA

DAN WEBB

JANUARY 13–JUNE 17, 2001

Bellevue, Washington

The artworks in this exhibition and catalogue amplify, complicate, or otherwise intensify the viewer's impressions of the building that contains them. The exhibition is intended to focus the viewer's attention on the profoundly physical character of light, and on the profoundly embodied nature of vision, while this catalogue is designed to connect artists' works, viewers' perceptions, and ongoing discussions of light from multiple disciplines. Show and book are idiosyncratic, highly selective, fragmentary collections—suggestive, poetic, perhaps frustrating: much like the collections of sense data that form our individual conceptions of our world.

Dan Flavin's evasive but unavoidable work extends itself—intrudes itself, extrudes itself—between viewer and architecture. His work very much *is* metal, current, glass, and gas; but it also is filling architecture, if architecture is conceived as container, and it also is dissolving architecture, if architecture is perceived as surface. Rodney Graham's *Camera Obscura Mobile* similarly deploys light to align architecture, object, and viewer in mutually dependent positions. As you climb into the carriage, the body shifts on its springs, the pinhole image projected into the coach moves, too, and, while you watch, your visual system fails to perform what has evolved into the rudimentary task of making the visible world seem stable and knowable. As you climb into the carriage, you experience the radical unreliability of what it is we think we see—and of the line between thinking and seeing. Joseph Kosuth's neon piece constitutes a related but more explicit epistemological critique. The mock (or is it?) authoritarian pronouncement "Visual space has essentially no owner" limns the political economy of the exhibition area in particular and of the sign in general. The presence of the slippery word "essentially," however, along with the odd coupling of commercial material and philosophical content, undermines the apparently decisive meaning of the statement. These works activate one of light's essential oscillations and, in so doing, enact the viewer's fundamental dilemma: What can be believed about what can be seen?

Light is a crucial part of, and yet is seemingly quite distinct from, certain elements of expression. Light and line, for example. Does light dematerialize line? Does line describe light, or does light de-scribe line? Tokihiro Sato's architectural metaphotography records his movement through space as lines of light. Performance, drawing, and photography (*photo* for "light" and *graphy* for "writing"): a veil of lines drawn with light, a sheaf of lines of light giving thickness to space, a tangle of lines of light that suggests volume and hollowness both. At midcentury, Mark Tobey synthesized a painterly style from Asian drawing conventions, European Surrealism, and the works of selected practitioners of American social and landscape realism. His white writing—a skein of lines of light—whether it obscures, reveals, or is subject and means both, is at once heavy with the process of its own making and as light as light can be. In Julianne Swartz's fiber-optic-cable works, light can be pure light and pure line if, but only if, it remains contained within the linear volume of the cable.

INTRODUCTION

BRIAN WALLACE

Light and space, pure perception, phenomenology: the articulation and reception of these concerns cycle through periods of academic hegemony, revanchist criticism, and varied irrelevancies. Hap Tivey's deployment of a delicate but robust work incorporating passively and actively projected light and image demands that equal attention be paid to the art, the architectural setting, and the exurban location. The conditional, quasi-independent status of the piece finds parallels in Iole Alessandrini's and Bill Viola's works, and relates metaphorically to the indeterminate status of light. Alessandrini's sculpture/installation—permeable and solid, spatially indeterminate yet absolutely visible—takes her ongoing investigation into the psychological aspects of spatial experience and extends it beyond her established architecture-engaged practice. Bill Viola's work, operating at the scales of eye, body, and architecture, embodies and limns—and utterly relies upon—the presence of the viewer. This conditionality, this dependence on the world, grounds these speculative investigations, as firmly as anything visible can be, in the realm of the actual.

Light connotes aspiration and inspiration; light reminds us of its opposites—darkness, hopelessness. Light, oscillating light, always insists upon the deep links between these extremes. Dan Webb suffuses a private dialectic with light, simultaneously playing up and playing down—and playing both up and down—the aesthetics and the metaphysics of an implied and actual column of light. James Carl's work allows light's physical and allegorical complexities to accumulate and extend into, and further complicate, the domains of culture, leisure, and electrical and institutional (and individual buying) power. And Morris Graves avoids the sun—voids the sun—by painting its light as reflected from, and made dark by, the soil of the moon.

To invoke light is to invite consideration of metaphysics and physics, epistemology and ontology, perception and cognition, and aesthetic theories and scientific methodologies. Light is familiar but mysterious, seemingly fundamental yet apparently conditional, a specific and real thing that at the same time exists only in, or only as, valences of metaphor. The history of our understanding of light exemplifies the history of the formation, destruction, and re-formation of entire bodies of knowledge. Light, too, is a seemingly necessary but surprisingly hard-to-define condition for, and allegory of, the operation of visual art. As artworks both partake of and remain apart from the world, so light flows along, consumes, and reactivates the contradictory impulses, cognitive dissonances, and irreconcilable facts that constitute our knowledge of our world.

Before I visited Niagara Falls, I imagined it in the wilderness. I imagined leaving one's car in a parking lot surrounded by large old pines, taking up rucksack and hiking boots, and climbing up through the broken light of a fragrant forest to reach the top, where—like the figure in Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer above the Mists*—one would be shattered by the awesome primordial phenomenon of one of the largest waterfalls on earth, an embodiment of millennia of untouched North American nature.

The experience of Niagara Falls is very different. One drives right up to the falls' edge; parks next to the postcard stand or sightseeing bus; peeks over a concrete wall at the river, rushing by at ankle height; and, for a dollar, purchases a plastic raincoat to wear while walking through a maze of wet tunnels.¹ Then, finally, one encounters the Sublime, in its modern, industrial form. Standing under the falls and leaning out over an iron rail, one can almost touch the blinding, relentlessly roaring water as it rushes past.

Of course, this display of power is not what it appears to be. If not for the tourist industry, Niagara Falls could be turned off altogether and that vast mass of dark gray-green water diverted into turbines to generate electric power. The falls are carefully maintained as a visual spectacle, a Disneyesque re-creation of a landscape, for the purpose of tourism, much like other roadside attractions such as cheesy motels, Burger Kings, and wax museums. Niagara Falls is operated around the clock, or, as stated in the treaty of 1950 between Canada and the United States: "during the daylight hours of the tourist season (from 0800 to 2200 hours local time, 1 April to 15 September), the flow over Niagara Falls [cannot be] less than 100,000 cubic feet per second." (In the winter and off-season, the flow may drop as low as 50,000 cubic feet per second.)² Niagara Falls is more than a managed spectacle; it is an exemplar of modern technology, or, to apply the words of Martin Heidegger, an exemplar of the principle of "putting to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such."³ The river's energy collects in a "standing reserve" that stockpiles electricity as well as the very spectacle of "nature." It is no longer the river that stands "over against us as object" and, therefore, as the Sublime.⁴ Now it is the technological mastery of nature that partakes of the sublime.

James Carl's illuminated *Fountain*—a fountain of both light and water—unravels our alienation from nature and from nature's return, in packaged form and on demand, as a standing reserve. Projecting the dim glow of a tourist destination into the exhibition space, the work proposes their equivalence. Continuous with the tradition of landscape painting, James Carl's image of Niagara Falls pitches a substitute nature into the context of high culture. It thus highlights, physically and metaphorically, the tradition of the museum as a collection of images of nature that stand in permanent reserve for the tired urbanite looking for a place to *get away from it all* or find recreational pleasure.

At the same time, the arrangement of the nine identical vending machines recasts the spectacle of nature in industrialized form. Impressive in its formal elegance, the linear and serial arrangement has the silently

BARBARA FISCHER

JAMES CARL'S *FOUNTAIN*

imposing, cool presence of the work of Dan Flavin, Bertrand Lavier, or Robin Collyer, among others. It shares their interest in ready-made forms—as stimulus not for surreal perception but toward a consideration of the reality of mass-produced identity in serial repetition. While the semicircular configuration of the machines echoes the curvature of Niagara Falls seen in the transparency mounted across the machines, our immersion in the spectacle of nature is interrupted at regular intervals by columns of buttons and dollar slots. Each approximately the size of the typical great white fridge of the suburban family, the vending machines offer the convenience—for \$1.00—of another ready-made: bottles of natural water.

In *Fountain*, a collection of nature presented in the museum echoes the transformation of Niagara Falls: its existence in a stock of images, its function as controlled spectacle, and its use for creating hydroelectric power. Electricity, in turn, makes the Niagara Falls image glow and keeps the standing reserve of bottled water cool, just as it lights the work of art and maintains the integrity, security, and climate of the exhibition spaces. The work offers the tonic of “nature,” not simply for our convenience, but—much more intensely at Niagara Falls, of course—to extricate surplus value and thereby work as a figure for the economy as well as for art and culture and their presentations.

1. Alex Wilson points out that all the workings of Disney World are hidden from the visitor. Miles of underground corridors—“utilidors”—allow workers, supplies, utilities, and telecommunications to reach all parts of the “total Vacation Kingdom.” Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to Exxon Valdez* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991), p. 176.
2. Niagara Falls, Canada, Visitor and Convention Bureau brochure.
3. See Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in David F. Krell, ed., *Basic Writings*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), p. 320. The possible application of Heidegger’s essay to the workings of Niagara Falls was explored by Carol Bigwood, Professor of Contemporary Continental Philosophy, University of Toronto, 1992.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 322.

JAMES CARL

Born 1960, Montreal

Lives and works in Toronto



Fountain, 1997

Nine vending machines, backlit photo transparency,
spring water

72 x 33 x 360 inches

Courtesy of the artist



James
Carl

8.97 TORONTO ST





Bellevue Art Museum

o o o INQUIRE WITHIN

The inaugural exhibition for the new
Bellevue Art Museum building
designed by Steven Holl Architects, New York.

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and curated by Brian Wallace.

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