



The Locus+ Archive

Elizabeth Wright

Space Travel, 2005

Park and Ride

Dave Beech

The art historian Ernst Gombrich once complained about a picture being moved from its usual wall in a major European gallery. His accustomed walk directly to the picture he wanted to see, and to see again, did not lead to the work. Gombrich does not complain merely that he was inconvenienced or frustrated. Returning to the work accrues an experience of the work through many viewings which is necessary for great works that do not reveal themselves all at once. Searching for the work in the collection, therefore, is a form of noise, interrupting the aesthetic experience with banality. Art has a temporality that is impossibly timeless. Gombrich revisits the same work, time and again, and uninterruptedly, out of a desire to match the temporality of the work itself. Indeed, the ability of the artwork to sustain and reward such extended attention is taken to be something like proof of its greatness. Or, perhaps, the ability to revisit the work and remain in its company is *a reassuring experience of the individual's sovereignty*, of matching the object's ostensible eternity: a technique for handing power over the inert object to the individual?

Elizabeth Wright's latest work, "Space Travel", can be seen for a maximum of 23 seconds at a time. This is, in Gombrich's temporality of art, a mere blink of the connoisseur's eye. Contemplation, absorption, close visual attention, the aesthetic experience of the beautiful – none of the time-honoured forms of art's attention can be sustained on a stingy portion of 23 seconds. For this we need an alternative aesthetic tradition, one which thrives on pace. Baudelaire's preference for the modern instant against classicist eternity argued for a heroism of modern life. His temporality of modern art is derived from the temporality of urban experience. It is the temporality that is produced by the social space of the city. And here in the city, in a short tunnel of Tyneside's Metro, the descendants of the *flâneur* – shoppers, commuters, gangs on a night out, cinema goers – often expect, perhaps even *demand*, this pace. If not faster. How many shots in the typical Hollywood movie last as long as 23 seconds? And, despite Gombrich, doesn't the average visitor spend as little as 2 seconds in front of each work in any art gallery? Here, don't we see evidence of the city's temporality asserting its hegemony over every possible experience? And what if it does? Baudelaire's modernity of momentous moments, catching a glimpse of something as the gentleman *flâneur* wanders around town, is the prototype of Wright's unreflective temporality. Or, to make the point in more telling terms, Wright's new public work is a fleeting encounter, not a monumental, permanent obstruction. Wright has produced work in the past that dealt with issues around scale; in this work she has reduced the time in which we encounter the work. It lasts 23 seconds. At least, initially.

As the viewers (a collection of strangers rather than the ideal individual spectator of aesthetic forms of attention) pass through the tunnel, a series of images are illuminated by light from within the carriage. Sitting in the train, the viewers are on familiar

territory, used as they are to watching TV and the cinema *off* their feet. The aesthete, on the contrary, views at their own pace because they remain *on* their feet and therefore retaining control at least over the duration of the experience. Stillness, slowness and dwelling on an object over a considerable stretch of time are required for a certain kind of aesthetic perception. Viewing while travelling at speed, however, is more usually associated with looking out of the windows of cars, trains, boats and planes as the scenery whizzes by. There can be no illusion of subjective sovereignty and self-sufficiency in such experiences. Here the inert object is not subject to the imperious gaze of the detail-junky. In other words, the pace of Wright's new public work *permits* us to experience art in a way that traditional aesthetic forms of attention do not. We are not obliged to adopt aesthetic forms of attention; we are not obliged to treat the art as elevated, superior or oppressive. At this speed, Wright's work drives home something that has been a permanent feature of her work: the marriage of art with the commonplace. In other words, if one of the dangers of approaching the commonplace in art is the ability of art's institutions to incorporate banality only on the condition that it *raises* banality out of the banal, conferring value on it that the banal lacks, then Wright's new work gives an unusual advantage to the commonplace over taste.

Wright's images, which appear in the tunnel like a short film clip (only it is the body of the viewer that is moved mechanically rather than the images passing before us), consist of familiar sights. We recognise everything that we see: the images are all taken from car parks. This surprising little spectacle is, it turns out, a collection of 115 photos of nothing special. The images do not survey a destination, but a place between places. The sort of place is a non-place that the viewer occupies while passing through the tunnel. Through a simple act of montage, then, the tunnel and the car parks are 'twinned' like European villages. As non-places, though, these sites have no citizens, only temporary occupants. Passengers and drivers do not travel to these places; they pass through them on the way to somewhere else. Train drivers might pass through the tunnel more than most, but it is not a destination. And while car park attendants will experience the car park as a place of work rather than somewhere to pass through, the journey through each level, culminating in a sort of exit on the roof, even for them, constitutes a threshold onto the wider world. The exit, a false exit, is the non-place within the non-place. As homologous spaces, the tunnel and car park work on each other, establishing a dialogue that discloses something about each of them. The car park represents the tunnel back to itself, as non-place, as passageway, as margin and frame; and, the experience of the tunnel represents the car park sequence back to itself, as event, as movement and as fleeting.

Not that this fleeting experience lacks aesthetic pleasure. The philosopher Roland Barthes talks compellingly about the seductions of seeing things fleetingly through a window or a gap. Pleasure is heightened, intensified, by being almost missed or almost out of sight. Losing our privileged position at the centre of a fixed, perspectival, unidirectional visual field costs us the pleasures of appearing to ourselves as subjects rather than objects, but there are pleasures in losing oneself, getting carried away and ecstatic surrender. There are pleasures in being an object, a body, too. In one sense, rushing past these images is a reminder that our bodies are speeding along in someone else's hands. Suddenly, perhaps, a trace of the pleasure of the fairground ride is brought to bear on the pleasures of art. Catching a glimpse of Wright's images as we pass through the tunnel, don't we take a certain pleasure in contingency, in our being overwhelmed, surprised by events? At the same time, there is a pleasure in the fragment that greets you when your train passes by this image. Before Darwin had transformed our understanding of the deep past, fossils were thought to be the subterranean equivalent of flowers, placed there by god to beautify the world below ground. Wright's new public

work reminds us, I think, of how it must have felt to discover these curious, fascinating objects before they were given over to science.