Janice Rahn and Michael Campbell's
The Elephants' Graveyard

All I relate here is only from verbal and written accounts, photographs and video images I have seen of Janice Rahn and Michael Campbell's *The Elephants' Graveyard* (2005). My knowledge and experience of their work to a great extent come from and exist in my imagination — not unlike all we know of the historic events that the artists refer to in *The Elephants' Graveyard*: the arctic and sub-arctic expeditions of Franklin and Shackleton, and the moon landing of the Apollo astronauts. So much that we know in our information era only exists because of our imaginations. Few of us have really seen someone die from a gunshot wound; nor have we all gone into the pyramids, touched the intimate lives of Sub-Saharan lions, walked in space. We don't really know what happened in ancient Greece or even what went on in the forest grove during the 1990 Oka crisis. We weren't at the Stanley Cup, the Grey Cup or the World Cup. We didn't visit New York City after Armageddon, nor have we had hand-to-hand combat with evil monsters and demons while wearing a metal bikini. Yet all these experiences and places that are geographically remote from us, all these events that happened when were not present or maybe not even alive, and all the scenes that didn't really happen at all but were fabricated for us — all these things are meaningful because we have heard, read or somehow seen them represented. Consequently, they inhabit our imaginations. I invite you to read what I have to say about *The Elephants' Graveyard* and if you do end up seeing the actual piece, compare what you have read here with what you have experienced and what you remember. And ask yourself, "What does my actual experience count for?"

If you were there, this it what you would have seen

A 20-foot silver Airstream Safari trailer, circa 1965, is parked outside. The exterior is unaltered except for the sheet aluminum covering all the windows. There is a 16 foot arched entrance tunnel, with a slight curve in it, made of white canvas stretched over a structure of tent poles and wood. We enter a rudimentary door at the entrance to the tunnel, and walk over a rough plank floor. There are speakers playing the sound of arctic wind; if there is some real wind the whole structure rattles. When we arrive at the door of the trailer it is draped with wide strips of grey felt, which must be pushed aside to enter. Inside, rather than finding the usual domestic travel space, we enter a low-lit projection room. To our right, there's a comfortable bench that curves around, lining the back and side walls. Facing it is a rear projection video screen, which is embedded in the wall but split vertically into two panels (in the proportion of one-third to two-thirds). The whole interior, ceiling and walls, is lined with acoustical foam and felt.

On the video screen there are slow-motion images dissolving into one another and giving off a blue glow. The camera moves across icy landscapes. We see an unidentified lunar-like surface, mountains and a tall-mast sailing ship stuck in the ice. The camera point-of-view in all the images is from overhead. There are also three small monitors above the main screen, also embedded in the wall. These play grainy images of the sea vessel. There is a soundtrack: the voices of astronauts come from behind the screen and the voices of ground control speaking to them come from behind the viewer benches. The conversation is about technical details and observations as the astronauts orbit and land on the moon. The sound is old and scratchy, and is punctuated with little beeps. The loop lasts about 12 minutes.

The overall effect is of being in a waiting room, or on the deck of an imaginary space ship. When the piece was shown previously, (in the Alberta Biennale at the Edmonton Art Gallery and the Walter Philips Gallery at The Banff Centre, both in 2005) people liked to stay in this space, saying that it was calming; some even had to be asked to leave. When they did come out it inspired them to recount their own memories related to the piece's sound, images and objects.

A collaboration starting in the north

This is Janice and Michael's third collaboration. The way they work together is to get in a exploratory mode where they read, watch documentaries, make notes and drawings, and just try things out. Rather than deciding that they want to say one thing, they bring things to the table and have fun with them. Reflecting critically on their own experiences is central to their process.

Janice's time living in the arctic, for 10 years in the 1980s, was one point of departure for *The Elephants' Graveyard*. She went there attracted to the landscape and nature, and loved it, but in the end she had to leave.

Janice ended up having a bad reaction to mythic representations of the north. Northern and southern Arctic and Polar Regions have historically captured the imagination as some of the least "developed" places on earth, and they continue to do so. The Antarctic was the last continent to be visited and mapped, and the only continent to be truly discovered because, unlike all the others, it was uninhabited. About 100 years ago Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton wrote: "Indeed the stark polar land grips the hearts of men who have lived on them in a manner that can hardly be understood by the people who have never gone outside the pale of civilization." This comment sums up common Western attitudes towards the earth's cold poles: on the one hand these places are dismissed as economically and culturally insignificant and on the other they are defended with romantic fervour for the power and beauty of their relatively "untouched" landscape. For many the north symbolizes a refuge from urban civilisation. There is of course a major disconnect with the lives of the Inuit and other first nations people that live there, and the pollution from the south that accumulates there. A Deputy Minister of the Department of Northern Affairs and Natural Resources wrote circa 1958, "Just as the conquest of outer space is providing a new challenge to mankind, so the conquest of the Arctic presents . . . a uniquely Canadian space challenge." The reason that Janice left the North was that it started to look like a postcard. That is, its mythology began to overshadow her real lived experience of it.

What is the actual value of real lived experience? The answer is problematic and contested. And, as Janice experienced, lived experience is often confused with the symbolic value of the real and virtual events that surround us.

The interconnectedness of all things

The Elephants' Graveyard is about perceived conflicts between the real and the virtual, and the heroic and the banal. It does not try to resolve, answer or even criticize these dichotomies, but instead plays with them. We are immersed in a symbolic space that lulls us — with historic images of romantic and successful technological accomplishments (the Apollo 11 moon landing and the Airstream) — while at the same time it evokes tragic failures (the ship trapped in the ice of a frozen barren landscape, and failed spaceship launches and re-entries).

An important part this work is its game of connecting disparate things. *The Elephants' Graveyard* conflates, among other things, the Victorian obsession with finding a North West Passage, the 1960s obsession with reaching the moon and an ongoing bourgeois obsession with traveling in comfort. As we watch the ship caught in the ice and listen to a soundtrack of the voices of a space launch control room and astronauts the conventions of cinema connect the two dramas unfolding inside the vintage Airstream.

The tall-mast sailing ship we see in the video is actually a fusion of two ships, one from the 19th Century and one from the 20th. that belonged to Arctic explorer Sir John Alexander Franklin and Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton respectively. Features from each were combined to make the scale model that appears in the video. Like the hybrid sailing vessel transporting its passengers to a distant and uninhabited world, the space vessel carries the astronauts, who we hear speaking, into unknown territories. Sailing ship juxtaposed with spaceship, the artists take advantage of how language is used to make new technologies familiar and less threatening by creating continuity. Airstream calls its biggest trailers Land Yachts, suggesting they too are vessels. There are many further connections between Apollo and the Airstream. For example, both are indebted to aircraft design and engineering. And, on a more anecdotal level, when they returned to earth after walking on the moon the Apollo 11 astronauts were quarantined in a modified Airstream.

The artists play also with conflating the 'real' and the 'fake' in the work's multimedia aspects. They hired a plane to fly over the mountains near their home in Alberta: the mountains and winter landscapes shot from the air are real. They are intentionally used to confuse our perception of scale; they dissolve into the other

images of ice and snow. The sailing vessel, shot from a similar aerial perspective, appears real to many viewers, but if we look close enough we will realize it is a model, shot from above from a ladder. The surface that we read as lunar-looking, because of the scale shift and the Apollo 11 audio, is in fact ice, but probably the same frozen fish pond near the artists' home in which the model boat was documented. The voices in the soundtrack are taken from an authentic document of a historic event: they come from a LP recording of the actual Apollo 11 communications. But a quick search on the internet will remind us that the authenticity of Apollo 11 has long been contested by conspiracy theories that suggest that some of or the entire moon landing was faked, using trick photography and film sets on earth. And, one more connection — while the veracity of Franklin and Shackleton's polar expeditions are not contested, it is interesting to note that there were explorers throughout history who made false claims of their discoveries.

Taken as a whole, the piece insists on the interconnectedness of things, crossing time and conceptual barriers. The Arctic and sub-arctic expeditions, space exploration, and even the tourism implied by the Airstream are all about mastering or even dominating the natural world, showing that, as humans, we can go anywhere we want as long as we have the right ship and enough provisions. Conflating a failed and a successful expedition proposes that both are images of the wonder and the folly of human domination over nature, that is, they are images of the wonder and folly of human vulnerability in nature.

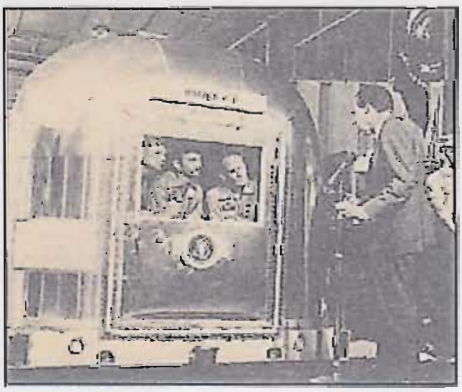
The corridor to the past, romantic but critical

There is a temptation in writing on a work that is skilfully constructed around interesting and complex connections to just keep on digging them up and writing them down. It is fun. But I will stop myself here. You will see the work, and then you can make your own connections. I will provide, briefly, just two more ideas.

I thought about discussing at some length how the corridor leading to the Airstream is a transition space that sets the mood with the sound of the howling Northern wind; its construction is provisional — tent poles lashed to one-by-twos. It seems improvised, flimsy, yet ingenious and admirable in its construction. Admirable because of how it uses available means to their maximum to create an effective shelter, thereby recalling the ingenuity demonstrated by both Franklin and Shackleton in their survival quests. It stands in contrast to the Airstream itself, which is an icon of streamlined machine age design principles. If passing through the hallway, with the wind rattling the poles, gives us a certain sense of anxiety, it is the site in the installation where we are physically active. And that seems significant in relation to the comfort we enjoy and the passive role we assume once inside.

I also wanted to write extensively about the role of the past in *The Elephants' Graveyard*. I want to mention a 1985 book by David Lowenthal called *The Past is a Foreign Country*. This author points out how both personal histories and world history can provide us with all kinds of benefits, especially when we are consumed by thoughts that time as we know it may come to an end (from nuclear war, 1950-1990; from environmental calamity, 1990-present). The past is said to be reassuring, because it is fixed, and simply because it is where we come from. But, we are also reminded of more negative perceptions of the past. Nietzsche is quoted, saying, "Every past is worth condemning." Nostalgia can be motivated by fear, which keeps us from occupying the present; it also can provide us with a repose needed to return to the present with new perspectives. I wanted to write about how Janice and Michael, in *The Elephants' Graveyard,* articulate a symbolic space where the contradictory natures of these attitudes towards the past are softened. I am taken by how their installation is consciously critical *and* romantic, yet it remains coherent. There is something refreshingly generous in this. But you will see, not me.

I want to leave you now with David Bowie's 1969 melancholic anthem, *Space Oddity*, which, by the way, was featured in the BBC television coverage of Apollo 11. Please sing this to yourself: "For here am I floating round my tin can, far across the moon, planet earth is blue and there's nothing I can do." Wikipedia claims that, "An elephant graveyard is a fictional place where, according to legend, older elephants instinctively direct themselves when they reach a certain age. They then die there alone, far from the group." Is this true? All I can tell you for sure is that after writing this, I would like more than ever to see *The Elephants' Graveyard*.



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