

# IMAGE & IMAGINATION

Edited by Martha Langford

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## Lost Horizons, or the Gates Close at Sunset

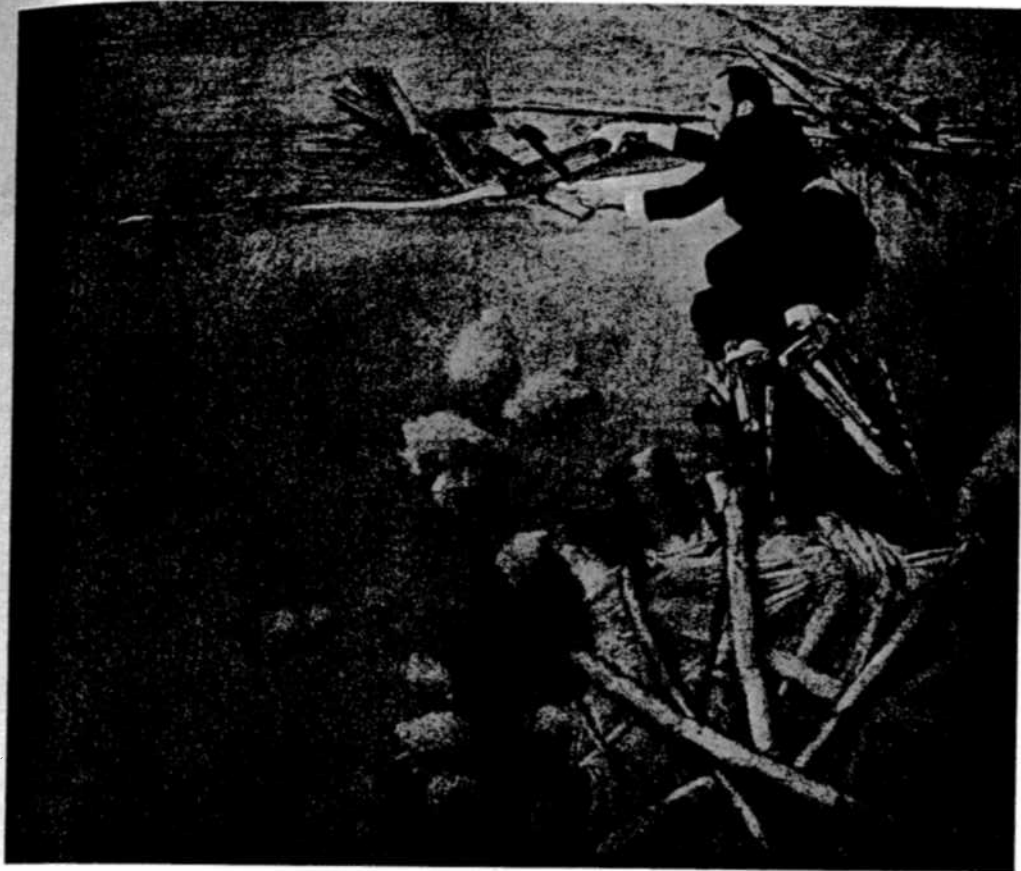
*Doubtful Realisms and Paradisiacal Gains*

MARTHA LANGFORD

There's a place for us,  
Somewhere a place for us.<sup>1</sup>

An image of the future comes back to haunt me: Shana and Robert ParkeHarrison's picture performance *Patching the Sky* (1997; fig. 5.1). An image of the planet on life-support, it projects our employment at the end of our species' days. A man in a suit, teetering above an irregularly shaped scaffolding on jerrybuilt stilts, mends an already much-mended backdrop. To see more of the ParkeHarrisons's work is to understand that this "scaffolding" actually represents the globe as a lumpy sphere of overprocessed resources and discarded industrial materials, the dreams of the First World technocracies reduced to a pensioner's ball of string. The "sky" is something like the canvas of a circus tent. It is creased and worn, yet somehow maintains enough integrity to support the weight of its faithful caretaker. The scene is absurd – and also familiar. It comments on our distressed environment and our small efforts to maintain it: *we recycle*. The ParkeHarrison mission is ecological, but if it were only that, we could absorb the lesson and move pragmatically on, taking no more than the fossil fuels we need today. Their vision sticks because, as Sylvain Campeau has noted, it is a vision of the earth without us.<sup>2</sup> The caretaker is alone, making the best of things with the tools he has left. Twentieth-century Western civilization is reduced to its most improbable and impractical vestiges: a Surrealist business suit; Brechtian distanciation; Art and Language; Arts and Crafts; and most ridiculously, the body, prosthetically extended, chemically cloned, and proleptically stunted. This Babel Tower of dystopic utterances is the ParkeHarrison post-Apocalyptic age, as well as the platform from which our agent attempts to reconstitute the horizon of human possibility. The gesture is plainly a joke.

In the ParkeHarrisons's work, as in twentieth-century cultural theory and philosophy, "horizon" is a multivocal referent. Figuring something conceivable or attainable, the horizon is the pioneer's destiny and guiding light, a "somewhere over the rainbow" that is both desired and deserved – our manifest destiny, perhaps. Phenomenology long ago adopted the term "intentional horizon" as a container for the spatial and temporal possibilities presented within a frame of consciousness. In Merleau-Ponty's usage, the horizon "guarantees the identity of the object throughout the exploration; it is the correlative of the impending power which my gaze retains over the objects which it has just surveyed, and which it already has over the fresh details which it is about to discover."<sup>3</sup> Sight is the dominant means of exploration, as affirmed by Jean-François Lyotard: sight is "the ultimate ground for every rational affirmation ... the originary foundational consciousness."<sup>4</sup>



5.1 Shana & Robert ParkeHarrison, *Patching the Sky* (1997), from the series *Exhausted Globe*

An analogy can be drawn between phenomenology as a system of thought and photography as a system of seeing, though the relationship should not be allowed to get too cosy. In "Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image" (1963), Hubert Damisch takes a scalpel to the idea of photography by imagining an image made from film that has been exposed to light without the use of a camera and without reference to the external world. The mental operation is a success, but the patient (photography) dies. Damisch quickly realizes that the nature of photography has been predetermined by a pre-photographic desire to seize hold of the fleeting images formed by the camera obscura. Since the camera obscura was already at the service of painting, the photographic image captured through the lens of a camera obscura was as culturally constrained as it was eagerly anticipated. As to photography's specific nature, Damisch settles on its function as an activator of consumption: because anticipated images are culturally "predigested," they are easy to consume. But – a crucial caveat – photographic art "uncovers the contingent nature of these things, soliciting in us the producer rather than the consumer of images." Photographic *art* puts the spectator to work as a producer of an aesthetic photographic experience. And Damisch shows the way, going back to a photographic experiment of 1822 which he elevates as "the most beautiful photograph so far achieved."<sup>5</sup>

Essays on cinema, but  
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## Shana and Robert ParkeHarrison: From *The Architect's Brother*

TOHU-LA CITÉ DES ARTS DU CIRQUE

Like death, extinction is felt not when it has arrived but beforehand, as a deep shadow cast back across the whole of life. The answer to the question of who experiences extinction and when, therefore, is that we the living experience it, now and in all the moments of our lives. Hence, while it is in one sense true that extinction lies outside human life and never happens to anybody, in another sense extinction saturates our existence and never stops happening. If we want to find the meaning of extinction, accordingly, we should start by looking with new eyes at ourselves and at the world we live in, and at the lives we live. The question to be asked then is no longer what the features and characteristics of extinction are but what it says about us and what it does to us that we are preparing our own extermination.

Jonathan Schell<sup>1</sup>

In *The Fate of the Earth*, Schell is describing the consequences of nuclear war, what the earth would be like afterwards, and, in the passage here cited, what it does to human beings to live in the shadow of that possibility. Terrible, then, to consider how easily the condition he describes can be transferred to another means of extinction: the transformation of the earth into a planet that cannot sustain human life. This is the world that Shana and Robert ParkeHarrison lead us to imagine through their photographic work.<sup>2</sup>

As Therese Mulligan explains, Robert ParkeHarrison's awareness of environmental issues grew in parallel with his knowledge of photographic history and appreciation of nineteenth-century photographic techniques. Combination printing, the paper negative, and the photogravure bring characteristics of the past into the present, thus enhancing the elegiac qualities of ParkeHarrison's fragile universe. At the same time, as Mulligan writes, "the veracity of the photograph, from which all his images are constructed, provides the convincing backdrop for narratives of separation and loss. And the influences from literature, theater, cinema, and painting enrich the work with symbols supportive of the artist's universal subjects, particularly the struggles of the Everyman."<sup>3</sup>

This Everyman, in his absurd one-size-too-small suit, is also the Only Man left standing in suites such as *Exhausted Globe* (1997), whose four tableaux narrate the protagonist's journey through the universe in search of an inhabitable planet. *Flying Lesson* (2000) depicts the figure's obeisance to nature, in the vain hope that birds released from their cages will carry him away. Later works, such as *Turning the Spring* and *Passage* (both 2001), capture the protagonist's fevered efforts to maintain, and keep faith with, nineteenth-century instruments of progress. In recent works, the figure is still lonely in his struggles, though he is sometimes not alone. Four clones of the Everyman (or is it three clones and an original?) are no more efficacious than the Only Man at bringing on the rain. And yet, there is something hopeful in this vision of communal ritual.



Shana and Robert ParkeHarrison, *Flying Lesson* (2000), from the series *Earth Elegies*. Photogravure

Visionary photography is a hybrid cultural form that was almost extirpated by Modernism's straight shooters. Still, there is a living tradition that the ParkeHarrison oeuvre extends with honour. In the United States alone, twentieth-century photographers such as Clarence John Laughlin, Barbara Morgan, Duane Michals, Arthur Tress, and Jerry Uelsmann have crafted photographic images to express subjective states of consciousness. The ParkeHarrisons create visions of the earth by investing our collective fears and hopes in their struggling clown. As he tends his desiccated plot, mends the rip in the sky, and witches for water, he is dreaming of a future. A tree, rooted in his mind, is still clinging to its leaves. There is light – and there will be shade.

*Martha Langford*

- 1 Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 147.
- 2 *The Architect's Brother* is the title of an exhibition of Robert ParkeHarrison's photographic works in mixed media and photogravure, organized by curator Therese Mulligan for the George Eastman House, as well as a book that covers production from 1997 to 2001. From *The Architect's Brother* is the fruit of a collaboration between the Eastman House, Bonni Benrubi Gallery, and Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal. A group of photogravures, the exhibition includes new images signed jointly by longtime collaborators Shana and Robert ParkeHarrison.
- 3 Therese Mulligan, exhibition panels, *Robert ParkeHarrison: The Architect's Brother*.