



Trinity Square Video presents

Map of the City Nelson Henricks

Exhibition: January 16 – February 14, 2009

Opening: Friday, January 16, 2009, 5 – 8pm

Artist Talk: Saturday, January 17, 2009, 2 – 4pm

Trinity Square Video Gallery
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Hours: M – F 10am – 6pm, S 12 – 4pm

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"As a building is a book / As a book is a building." This tautological simile is the keystone of Nelson Henricks' 20-minute dual screen installation *Map of the City*. Inspired by chapels and cathedrals that are three-dimensional representations of biblical texts, Henricks builds from this central concept a vision of the urban environment as a library.

Like an illustrated version of erstwhile library card-catalogues, *Map of the City* is constructed as a sequence of exuberantly colourful still images interspersed with text set against primary colours. While many of the stills show plastic toys, metal trinkets and bright maps, this vibrant playfulness is a foil to the fatalistic, even nihilistic, mood of the text.

Echoing themes in Jorge Luis Borges' short story *The Library of Babel*,¹ Henricks presents himself as a dutiful librarian classifying and preserving the endless images he encounters in the city. In Borges' story, the narrator is a librarian in a "Total library" made up of interconnected hexagonal chambers each containing walls of useless books. As a metaphor for the immeasurable vastness of the universe, Borges explains, "The library is unlimited and cyclical," while Henricks also states, "So many rooms in this world, but you will live in just a few of them."

Borges' unlimited library contains books with every possible combination of the letters of the alphabet and punctuation. Thus the vast majority of the collection is pure gibberish made up of random arrangements of letters. Occasional meaningful words or legible passages are found in the books. However, the librarians search mostly in vain because the never-ending scope of the library makes it virtually impossible to find a worthwhile volume. The sheer hopelessness of the librarians' search drives many of them to suicide and wanton destruction.

Likewise, Henricks comes at one point to despair the plethora of possibilities in his city. The text "Meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" shouts out in reaction to a flurry of images of banal objects: watches, buttons, keys, locks, teeth, dice, cars, rubber balls, toy

1. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel," *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*. Trans. by John M. Fein. (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1962)

soldiers and on and on. Against a series of images of broken clay antiquities and ancient stone rubble, he tells of a house built and torn down, a new one replacing it. Layer upon layer, the city grows as a palimpsest with the deeds of the current generation written over and obscuring those who came before. Time's onslaught begs the question: Is there anything new under the sun?

To this question Henricks and Borges answer both yes and no. In the Library of Babel, "Every copy is unique, irreplaceable but (since the Library is total) there are always several hundred thousand imperfect facsimiles: works which differ only in a letter or a comma." Indeed, it all depends on perspective. From a distance, the world is full of generalities. A book is like every book; a person is like every person. But when one looks at the minutiae of everyday life each individual object, person and book is in fact unique – though the difference may only be the placement of a comma. Yet, what importance can spring from such a small distinction.

Henricks uses a close-up perspective to show all his collected detritus, which serves to reinforce each object's uniqueness. Notably he concludes *Map of the City* with a series of snapshots, 35mm slides and film negatives each depicting an individual, which one may assume are portraits of Henricks' own friends and family. Each one is unique and important, at least to him. In the end, Henricks abandons his nihilism, urging us to *carpe diem*: "Drink your wine with a joyful heart, for it is now that you are favoured. Enjoy your life with those you love."

– Aubrey Reeves
TSV Programming Director

Bio: Nelson Henricks teaches at Concordia and McGill Universities. He is a graduate of Alberta College of Art and Design and Concordia's Film Production program. His works have been presented at galleries, museums and festivals worldwide and are in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, the Museum of Modern Art and the Museo des bellas artes Buenos Aires. Henricks was awarded the Bell Canada Award for outstanding achievement in video art.