

PRINT January 1988

## TIME BANDITS, SPACE VAMPIRES

Thomas Lawson

**HISTORY IS FASCINATING**, it beguiles with endless possibilities of meaning. So much can be read into the patterning of its ebb and flow, of its gyrations and stillnesses, that dreamers and speculators of all kinds seek to read their fortune there. And since everyone wants the security of certain interpretation (or the security of its denial), phantasms of stability are built up or torn down with astonishing regularity. These illusions of stopped time feed on a desire for completion. Here, instead, is a roundabout story, a story with neither end nor beginning.

Today, a visit to either of the two surviving cycloramas in the United States, in Gettysburg and Atlanta, is a family affair. Both are housed in specially constructed buildings in public parks with a mission, the Gettysburg National Military Park solemnly educational, Grant Park less somber, but equally favored as a good place for quality time with the kids. Their other attractions aside, the two cycloramas provide healthy doses of important-seeming information in enjoyable, bite-sized chunks. There are displays of Civil War artifacts in the entrance halls of both buildings—uniforms, weaponry, even, in Atlanta, a locomotive that saw service for the Confederate army. Not to be outdone, Gettysburg, in summer, has an autograph version of Lincoln's famous address on view. Both buildings have little dioramas to familiarize visitors with Civil War battle history—the litany of names, times, dates. Then both have a ten-minute warm-up film show, Atlanta's rehearsing some of these names and fitting them within a detailed narrative of one day's fighting, Gettysburg's discussing Lincoln's address. Only now, thoroughly prepared, may the visitor ascend into the cyclorama itself.

The paintings are huge, originally about 50 feet high with a circumference of 400 feet. Time has trimmed something of their girth: each now measures only 350-odd feet around, and the Gettysburg painting is down to a mere 26 feet in height. Over the years both have suffered from neglect and from unfortunate care; they have been rained on, snowed on, painted on, and built on. They have been restored so extensively that their original appearance is in doubt. In order to finesse this credibility problem, the paintings are now presented as theatrical events, the visitor's

gaze carefully directed. Light and sound take the audience through the narrative of each battle, again piling on incident and detail. The Gettysburg show ends, obviously enough, with an actorish reading of Lincoln's speech dedicating the battlefield graveyard: detail succumbs to the expected ideology, and the visitors file out in the assurance that civilization held fast and ultimately triumphed. The Atlanta show, located at the site of a major and still regionally resented defeat, has a more difficult time drawing to a conclusion, preferring to lavish fact and anecdote until the tour of the painting is over. Stunned by these torrents of picayune detail, the visitor leaves both cycloramas overburdened with information, yet uncertain of the actual, rather than mythic, significance of each battle to the course of the war—each is advertised as the major turning point. Nor does the visitor get a chance to consider the causes, the meaning, of the war itself. But then, what should we expect? These cycloramas, after all, are merely weird relics of an early phase of mass culture, a phase when art was only beginning to assert itself as having a different intention, a separate, potentially more disruptive discourse, than previously imagined. The cycloramas, unmanageable hybrids of pre-Modern painting and what were then the latest display technologies, exist now only as curious patched-up dinosaurs, akin in level of sophistication, on both ideological and illusionistic grounds, to the older rides at Disneyland. They now seem somewhat stilted in manner, mechanically obvious, ludicrous in scale (“The Battle of Atlanta” would fill the top floor of New York's Whitney Museum of American Art.) And although they are still fun, it is easy to understand, in retrospect, why they were obliterated by the technological advances of motion pictures. Originally housed in outsized tents and sham castles, they were swept away by the triumph of the picture palace.

The idea of making a large painting in the round was never merely an art idea, but a result of the conjunction of art and the descriptive sciences typical of the latter part of the 18th century. In an age increasingly preoccupied with the possibilities of representation, in all fields of human endeavor, the search was on for systems and machines that would encode the visible world. Topographical views of incredible detail, made possible by the camera obscura, were popular, but something more was wanted. That desire for intensity and accuracy led eventually to the camera and the development of photographic processes, but before that it led to the panorama painting, with its all-encompassing visual sensation.

The actual idea of how to accomplish this miracle of illusion first came to Robert Barker, a failed miniaturist languishing in a debtors' prison. The light coming down to his cell from a hidden source in the roof was his inspiration. On his release he moved to Edinburgh, where, in 1787, he filed a patent for panoramas. His first attempt was a watercolor view of Edinburgh from the observatory on top of Calton Hill, and it worked well enough that he moved to London to set up business. There, with his son as partner, he quickly realized that a completely round painting would require its own building for proper display. The design the Barkers developed for this became the standard for all the panoramas and cycloramas to come—a fantasy shell with an ornate doorway leading to a dark passage and stair, which in turn led to a raised platform surrounded by the walls of the huge painting, which made a circle around it. Climbing up onto this platform out of the darkness of the entrance hall, the viewer emerged in what by contrast seemed an extraordinarily bright space, which contained, as far as the eye could see, and in every direction, a vista. The Barkers' first joint effort, a view of London, became an instant hit when it opened, in 1792. In an age that delighted in a well-crafted view as the pleasing expression of a reasonable order, the panorama provided reason touched with magic. By 1794 it was so popular

that the Barkers were able to build, in Leicester Square, a more elaborate building with space for two separate views. The panorama boom was on.

***Two footnotes to the story so far.***

*The Barkers, familiar with the logic of imprisonment, devised their walled-in reasonable illusion at roughly the same time that Jeremy Bentham, seeking utility, not magic, was devising his illusion of totalitarian reason, the ideal jailhouse called the panopticon. Both panorama and panopticon are circular, windowless buildings, with an observation tower raised in their center; both are lit from a hidden source above. Both privilege the view from the center, indeed both make an ideological case for the centrality of the all-seeing eye of the individual viewer, who stands in for all viewers. In both, that privileged viewer feels all-seeing, omnipotent—yet this is an illusion. Clarity obscures.*

*At the height of their popularity, the no-longer-bankrupt Barkers hired a young artist who was later forced to resign from the Royal Academy after exhibiting another artist's work as his own. Of necessity, he then pursued a career as a restorer and faker of pictures for a nascent art market.*

The Barkers and their immediate imitators remained content with an elaborated topography, and soon their public could travel to places distant in time and place—from Pompeii to the Swiss Alps, from Constantinople to Paris—and never leave Leicester Square. It required little imagination, however, to think of enlarging the genre's potential audience by enlarging its scope, by recording events as accurately as places. In no time, the panoramic recreation of battle scenes outstripped in popularity the recreation of views. The public quickly learned to demand action, news of daring deeds from around the world. (In fact, the first attempt to import a panorama to New York, a view of Versailles installed facing Chambers Street in 1818, failed at the box office. This panorama is now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.) Napoleon soon recognized the political value of this burgeoning fascination, ordering that his artists represent his victories in the round. Pictured thus, his conquests engulfed the viewer in the press of immediate action, allowing the public, reliving the struggle from what could be imagined to be Napoleon's own vantage point, to identify further with the populist emperor. The success of this propaganda tool lay in its all-encompassing illusion, which Napoleon's artists heightened by adding apparently real trees, walls, cannons, and even bodies to the space between viewing platform and canvas. This Napoleonic intervention was a significant one, changing the panorama from curio to a form of agit prop. At this point, therefore, it is worth suggesting a distinction, reserving the original term “panorama” for the expanded landscape invented by Barker, and using “cyclorama” to describe those much more elaborate reconstructions of events that Bonaparte did so much to popularize. The irony is that the second-most-popular cyclorama subject in the 19th century was Waterloo. (The first was that other defeat, the Crucifixion.)

The panorama/cyclorama remained the most popular of art entertainment until the 1890s, despite competition from other exotic forms of presentation, from Daguerre's diorama, of the 1820s, with its seemingly miraculous transformations by means of colored lights (it was in fact dubbed the *Salle des Miracles*), to the “moving pictures” of John Banvard's “Panorama of the Mississippi River,” a mechanical scroll that took two hours to unroll, and that toured America

and Europe in the middle of the century as part of a carny show. At one time there were thirteen panoramas in Paris alone, and most major cities, and many small ones, boasted at least one. The 1870s and 1880s were the medium's golden age, a period when these gigantic and complex behemoths traveled the West, on occasion even reaching its eastern outpost in Australia. But these years of the cyclorama's triumph were also the years during which Manet and the rest inaugurated a new way of looking at and thinking about painting, a way that would make it seem more vitally connected to the realities of modern life. The clumsy machinery of the cycloramas' illusions proved unready for this kind of adaptation to changing circumstances. Furthermore, by the 1870s artists and their public were beginning to rethink their relationship. Patronage had become a puzzle. In France, the salon system was in crisis. The artist-as-maverick-showman solution—one thinks of Courbet and Turner as much as of the academy-trained cyclorama painters—required a patience with bureaucracy, not to mention an access to capital, beyond most artists. This was the period that saw the first stirrings of an art market as we know it: outside the museum, paying admission to see a painting would soon be a thing of the past. The cyclorama as a living form would become extinct. The golden age of the dinosaurs happened in spite of what was imminent, then, and in part as a paradoxical response to a daunting political reality.

France had been defeated by Germany in the Franco-Prussian War, yet it was the French who initially flocked to the new cycloramas of the war, seeking consolation in the heroic moments that they could snatch from their despair. The market may have been seeking reality, but the public still wanted the possibility of illusion, wanted the comfort of the big lie. The most successful, most famous cyclorama of the period was “The Siege of Paris,” by the father-and-son team of Félix and Paul Philippoteaux, which stood on the Champs-Élysées throughout the 1870s and into the ‘80s. Respected professionals with a steady record at the Salons, the Philippoteaux produced many big battle cycloramas during those years, and it was they who prepared the first version of “The Battle of Gettysburg” for display in Chicago in 1882. The son, Paul, returned to this piece in the following two years to touch up some problems that had vexed veterans’ groups, and a new, improved version, the remains of which are now at Gettysburg, went on display in Boston from 1884 to 1892.

In response to this French success with the ambiguities of history, German artists quickly realized that money could be made exploiting a war that their side had actually won. And as befits the victors, their work was generally admired as surpassing all previous efforts, on both artistic and technical levels. The most notable German work of the period, Anton von Werner's “Battle of Sedan,” which was unveiled in Berlin in 1883, pushed the effects of illusion to new heights through the use of a kind of relief modeling that attracted extra sparkle to the picture's highlights. This painting enjoyed a brief moment of political scandal when the kaiser, on opening night, discovered that he was not included. Imagine, a painting that encouraged the illusion that every spectator was an important participant in the field, in a position of command, but implicitly left a vacuum by absenting the very representative of command, the kaiser himself. This was quickly repaired, and the work went on to enjoy great success. The Germans, like the French, exported their work; they also exported their artists. It was at this time that the entrepreneur William Wehner set up the American Panorama Company in Milwaukee, staffing it with artists trained in the academies of Munich and Düsseldorf. For two decades, Milwaukee thrived as the Hollywood of the cyclorama industry, producing countless historical and religious pictures for

traveling shows. “The Battle of Atlanta” was one of these, opening in Detroit in early 1887 before moving on to Minneapolis, Indianapolis, Chattanooga, and finally Atlanta itself, in 1892.

Although in an odd way site-specific now, these things were never intended to be so specifically placed. The artists made money on tickets, not on commissions or private sales, so they sought out their public, and sought to give that public what it wanted. And what it wanted was the grand illusion. It wanted the spectacle to seem uncannily real—entertaining, but educational. As a result the artists went to extraordinary lengths to ensure that every detail was correct. The Philippoteaux came over to America to do research for their Gettysburg piece, interviewing survivors and surveying the actual site. They even went so far as to build an elevated platform on the battlefield from which to make sketches, and to have panoramic photographs taken, making an ideal, *plein air* simulacrum of the enclosed “picture without boundaries” that they intended to construct back in the studio in Paris. Wehner’s German team was no less thorough, also building an observation tower on site from which to recreate the scene. Close on a hundred years after Robert Barker first worked on his panoramic view of Edinburgh, the topographical desire for totality reached something of an apogee with these meticulous renditions of the moment. The uncanny effect of reality these pictures sought came not only from this overzealous attention to every detail, but from the judicious use of familiar convention, for the battle scenes were ordered according to the tenets of the academy.

### ***Two more footnotes to the story so far.***

*In 1870, a group of enlightened art patrons in New York founded the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with the idea of building a collection that would illustrate the entire history of art. Since they did not have enough money even to start this project seriously, they were forced to reconsider their objectives in some detail. The result was a decision to seek an educationally complete museum through a kind of sleight of hand, by filling the space with copies. They decided to order plaster casts and plaster models of the masterpieces of Western civilization, a bewilderingly encyclopedic array of quotations. In its utter collapse of distinctions of place and time, this procedure would bring the young museum to the threshold of pastiche. Two bequests in the 1880s made it possible, however, and by 1895 a collection of over 2,000 replicas was nearing completion. Ten years later a new board—with real money, Morgan money—backed away from this shadow world, and started to acquire the real thing.*

*Between 1881 and 1883 Vincent van Gogh, a very different kind of realist from the plaster-cast modelers, was living mostly in The Hague, where he confronted a very different shadow world. Already branded a failure in two previously chosen careers, he now wanted to become an artist; his father wanted him committed to the madhouse. Dismissive of most of the artists in town, van Gogh was nevertheless willing, always, to consider landscape, looking for an essential truth in the representation of the earth. During this time, most likely in 1882, he visited the “Panorama Mesdag,” newly opened in a nearby seaside town. This work, which still survives, is relatively modest, a painting of the small town and its beach. Structurally, it is true to form: one enters through a dark passageway, which brings one up into what appears to be a sand dune. Beyond lies the town, the beach, and some fishing boats under a storm-laden sky. Van Gogh found the picture faultless, momentarily beguiled by the security of its conventional realism.*

***And one more footnote—this one bringing us up to the present.***

*The November 1987 issue of The Atlantic Monthly ran an interesting story about the current situation in the production and marketing of African tribal art. Turns out that the bulk of this work entering the United States is brought in by clans of “runners,” who use age-old smuggling routes to bypass export rules, then sell their wares to dealers and collectors, often out of dingy rooms in Times Square hotels. The runners like to keep their bases covered, so what they have for sale varies dramatically from the cheapest machine-made rip-off for the tourist trade to the occasional piece with a genuine tribal pedigree. The bulk of what they have, however, is what Nicholas Lemann, the author of the article, points out would normally be called “fake.” This of course suggests that a great many, perhaps even most, of the objects called African tribal art in private and public American collections are in a sense suspect.*

*What can this mean?*

*Rehearsing a little history, Lemann reminds us that Pablo Picasso and the other early Moderns found value in what they saw as the spirituality of African art. As this interest inevitably created a market, standards had to be invented by which to rank the new collectibles so that Western values, cash values, could be applied to them. Pretty soon an object's ritual use became its badge of authenticity. A piece that had been part of a ritual, that had been “danced,” was worth something; one that had not was merely a souvenir. The distinction worked well at first, while the balance of supply and demand remained steady. However, as the modern world became more modern, more people wanted to buy a connection to the soul, and sought it particularly in tribal carving (and in expressionist painting). This had the predictable effect of shrinking resources and raising prices. The problem in the tribal-carving market today is that the expansion of the modern world has created market growth but has also all but destroyed the societies that make and use the masks and totems. Now these objects tend to appear, pro forma, at a variety of independence days, victory days, birthdays—any vaguely ritual gathering that will enable a dealer to say, with a straight face, that the pieces have been danced. At the same time, an increasing number of carvers, aware of the desires of the buyers in the “First World,” make copies of objects of acknowledged power—perhaps objects that they themselves made years before. Since tribal art by its very nature is generic rather than individualist, who is to say that the copy is less “authentic” than the original, since the original itself was only a version of a traditional form? Whatever one thinks of this, the upshot, as Lemann remarks, is that little of the African tribal art available on the market today can be considered “genuine” in the usual sense.*

*If we relax the standards applied to these objects, and judge them as we might judge contemporary Western art, their lack of being “danced,” or their very cursory stab at it, begins to get even more interesting. According to Lemann, various westerners who have explored the field report that the studios of many of the successful producers of tribal art in the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Mali, Liberia, and Cameroon are fully furnished with almost the latest coffee-table books and glossy magazines, just an information step behind the studios of New York, Los Angeles, or Cologne. These artists have simply changed patrons. Since they can no longer make fetishes for their own vanishing native culture, they now make fetishes for ours, working, like many of their peers in the West, to satisfy a market demand for readily recognizable, easily comprehended facsimiles of the authentic.*

When you come to a town like Alice Springs, you come to a place on the edge of what is euphemistically known as the civilized world. Far from the centers of Western culture, Alice has meaning only in terms of commerce. The town is little more than a truck stop and railway depot in the hot red heart of the Australian desert. It is rarely a final destination but rather a transfer point, a place to make connections. It is a prosperous enough little town, boasting a modernized downtown strip made mall-like with brick sidewalks and plants arranged in wooden boxes. A block away runs a river, dry most of the year, and here, under the shade of the gum trees that grow in the parched waterway, sit groups of aboriginals, dusty, malnourished, apparently despondent. In a sense, Alice Springs is not just a transfer point but also a border town, a place where the connection you can make is between two very different cultures.

The white man's Alice is ruled by time, the day regimented by the schedules of the airlines and the railroad. An invisible network of arrivals and departures provides the daily structure of meaning, and nothing but that structure counts. Even the museums, and there are museums of a sort here, attach themselves to this transitoriness: one celebrates early aviation, another the automobile, a third the telegraph. These museums do not attempt to provide a real framework with which to understand the place. Instead, they are content to serve as repositories of obsolete machinery, chambers in which evidence of the passing through space and the passing of time are isolated, disconnected, and rendered safe from the questioning gaze of history. The great desert that surrounds this clock-tied but history-free settlement is often described by white Australians as a place unburdened by culture, an idyll of nothingness. The vast expanses of red earth, dotted with the bluish green of the spinifex and the occasional gum tree, roll out under an intensely blue sky. Here the eye of Western civilization can see little trace of itself or of its past. All it sees is unstructured time—a perfect place for recreation, and for viewing the wilderness as spectacle, as a photo opportunity en route to discover “the essence of Australia.”

But this desert is not only the empty place of white desire. It is also, and more meaningfully, the complex landscape surrounding Uluru, the navel of the aboriginal universe—in its English name, Ayers Rock. This great red outcrop is the point of origin of a people's world view. In many ways, the dusty men and women in the dry riverbed have been made outcasts in their own home. Their culture lacks the idea of property, and it is only since the '70s that they have begun to demand the right to possess their ancestral land in the litigious way that the white authorities can understand. Yet they have always possessed this land, which is precisely mapped out in the dreamtime stories they tell each other over the generations. Unlike the narratives that we construct, these stories do not present time as linear. They present time and space together as an open terrain. The dreamtime stories tell of the travels of a variety of mythic and totemic beings across the desert plains. They can be interpreted as the history of a nomadic people and of their encounters with other groups, and with natural disasters. They can also be read as road maps, describing the ways across the desert and locating watering holes and good shelter, and warning of hazards. They are about survival on both a practical and a cultural level. Daily life is understood as part of a larger history, and not as a mechanically measured series of disconnected moments.

There are six art galleries in Alice. This is a town in which you can find a version of anything you want, and a picture to go with it. Some of the art available is made by present-day aboriginal artists. Traditionally, these artists are keepers of the dreamtime stories, for the patterns they paint or mark out on the desert floor or on the walls of a cave function as reminders as the tale unfolds.

The work therefore has a use, tied in with its ritual function. In the past, the art had no other value, and the images were as fugitive as the desert sands. Even the cave paintings were temporary, canceled out by each succeeding year's performance of the ritual of collective remembering. But since the coming of the first white explorers this has changed, for the whites wanted mementos and souvenirs; the idea of a history held simply in the memories of its participants was too abstract for them, they wanted to have something to hold, something to remember by. And so the artists, being accommodating, transferred parts of their patterning onto bark, turning some of their dreams into currency. Later, in the early '70s, a group of younger aboriginal artists working in Papunya, a settlement about half a day from Alice, took this a step further, re-presenting the same fragments of dreamtime imagery in acrylics on canvas. This shrewd, informed move repositioned their work, removing it from the ethnographic museums and craft shops and setting it within the more valuable (in cash terms) confines of the art museums. These paintings, typically large scale with an all-over pattern made of an accumulation of discrete dots, meshed perfectly with the concerns of Western painters of the time. And the artists continue to play out an elaborate ballet, reflecting on the disabled state of their own traditions while toying with the grand ruin of another tradition that is totally foreign to them.

Another group of aboriginal artists, working collaboratively, has effected a similar transformation of aspects of their traditional rituals, re-presenting them for a basically white audience in the art museum, as performance art. In the process, the artists lay bare our prejudices and preconceptions while keeping their own secrets to themselves. Watching a piece by the Ramingining Performance Group is a confusing and contradictory experience in which expectations are overturned, assumptions challenged. In the hallowed interior of the museum—for, like the Papunya paintings, this is museum-quality work—an area is taped off and filled with sand. At the announced time a number of men and boys in loincloths, bodies daubed with white powder, enter the arena. At the same time, a group of very skinny, hungry-looking women and girls in ragged black shifts gather along the taped edge. During the performance the actors talk back and forth among themselves, laughing. Often it seems as though they are trying to decide what to do next, or maybe trying to remember. Now and then a seated man blows into a didgeridoo and the women shuffle back and forth, clapping time. The boys play in the sand, digging a hole, making a mound. Suddenly a yellow plastic bucket is brought on, filled with water, and emptied over one of the men, washing off his white dusting. The performance is over, and the mostly white crowd shuffles and claps, uncertain in its response. Expecting something fabulous, be it a spiritual event or a religious spectacle, they have instead watched some poor, unhealthy-looking people do nothing much, and have been made aware of themselves as voyeurs. Further, some recognize references to the work of earlier, Western performance groups like Grand Union in the use of casual, everyday actions and movements, and in the mixing of children and adults as equal performers; they recognize these references, but are unsure what to do with them, since primitive rituals are not supposed to be influenced by the activities of sophisticated New Yorkers in the basement of the Judson Church.

At the same time that these aboriginal artists were rethinking their relationship to the two cultures that provide their context, a Dutch artist by the name of Henk Guth was rethinking his relationship to European culture. A decidedly minor participant in the Parisian scene of the '50s and early '60s, he apparently wanted to emulate Gauguin and voyage to exotic and tropical parts, but at first got only as far as Melbourne. By 1966 he had made it out to Alice, as far from the

corrupting influences of Montmartre as he could imagine. There, inspired by the vastness of the outback, he continued to paint, his work becoming more descriptive, in a naively conventional way, as the years passed. At a time when artists like Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer were going into the western deserts of North America in search of a space in which to develop alternative ways of working with the landscape, ways that would at least address the shortcomings of the marketplace as an arbiter in art matters, Guth proceeded as though all that was needed was a different subject matter. In 1971, a year after Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, Guth had an epiphany. Recalling the strange tourist attraction in The Hague called the "Panorama Mesdag," the same painting van Gogh had enjoyed in the 1880s, he had the idea of doing something similar, a large circular painting of the desert, to be viewed from a raised central platform like a lookout. To effect this project, he had to build, and what he built is a strange octagonal tower, with battlements and a central spire rising behind a more conventional structure that could house a shop or a restaurant. There are three main rooms to the Studio Guth: the first contains an eclectic and at times condescending collection of aboriginal artifacts and bric-a-brac; the second, a preposterous room decorated with red plush and a tiled fountain, houses what is described as a permanent collection of Guth's own paintings. The third room, directly over this funeral parlor, is the room of the panorama itself.

Climbing the spiral staircase into the panorama one comes upon a tremendously undistinguished rendition of the desert landscape laid out in a wrap-around painting that measures 20 feet high by 200 feet in circumference. Between the viewing platform and the canvas lies an odd no-man's zone littered with sand and dead branches. The room is airless, the illusion meager. Looking at this strangely naive work is a puzzling experience: it is not good enough, or crazy enough, to compel respect, not bad enough to raise a laugh. Thoroughly mediocre, thoroughly conventional, it is yet raised in triumph in its own castle out in the back of beyond, an act of outrageous hubris. Inevitably, looking at this embattled outpost of Paris, one thinks of that other lonely stand against the corruptions of the market, Don Judd's Marfa complex, boot camp turned art bunker in the Texas plain. Both enterprises want to claim a certain authenticity in relationship to their place in the world, want to be understood as site-specific. And yet both have their sights raised somewhere else entirely.

In its ineffectual way, the "Panorama Guth" enacts a scenario of control. Within its walls unfolds a delusion of mastery. The lower galleries mimic the function of the museum, inventorying various objects and the artist's response to them. The relics and rubbish are collected and classified in one room, the artist's renditions and reworkings, his interpretations, hang in the other. The wild freedom Guth sought as he fled Europe for the desert has been broken into tiny fragments, little mementos; they have been ordered and placed in full view, under control. And when we ascend the staircase to the panorama, that blind panopticon of the desert, we stand there, in the artist's place, proudly surveying, and possessing the land as far as the eye can see, which is as far as the curtain of stretched canvas. Guth's ambition is utterly defeated by its own timidity. All that it can possess, all that it can control, is this pallid representation, locked up safe in its white clapboard castle.

***Two final footnotes on the story so far.***

*On the day that Sherrie Levine's show opened at the Mary Boone Gallery, New York, last September, the New York Times ran a front-page story exposing presidential-candidate Joseph Biden's wholesale appropriation of a speech by British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock. There was also a story about Levine's show in the back of the paper, in which she was quoted as saying, "It's not that I think nothing's original, I just think it's not so easy to know what original means." I think I know what she was getting at, but a few weeks later the Newsday columnist Sydney Schanberg, noting the conjunction of these two stories, took it contrarily, writing in his newspaper that Levine was no better than other rip-off artists, fakers, and forgers—no better than Joe Biden. It is certainly true that Levine would have been thrown out of the Royal Academy in the 1840s, forced, like Robert Barker's onetime assistant, to pursue a career as a forger and restorer.*

*In 1889 van Gogh painted a picture of irises during a lucid spell in the sanatorium. This past November 11, the painting was sold at auction for a total of \$53.9 million including various fees and taxes, an extraordinary sum for a tiny sliver of authenticity. Increasingly, the only value expressed in a public way by art is a financial one, and the only art that enters the mainstream discourse is art that can be quantified. It is as though the art market values only art that lives in a time warp, a free-trade zone in which value floats, like the dollar on the international exchange, looking for its ever-changing level. The anxiety this induces creates its own backlash: in an attempt to anchor the value of specific art commodities, or, better, to peg them to a rising curve, manikin authorities are produced to manufacture simple little historical narratives. These stories of influence and neglect do not actually tie the objects in question to any history, and thus to any possibly useful meaning, but, rather, chain them together in genealogies that continue to drift free of sense.*

*The staggering sum for the van Gogh is more than enough to buy several handsome pieces of top-of-the-line military equipment, the kind of equipment only madmen lust after. Only vast accumulations of capital, by corporate entities rather than human beings, can now afford to buy into the authenticity market. The rest of us must do with imitations and surrogates, or tune into the TV-news talk shows to watch the experts discuss the meaning of real events as they soar into the empyrean of the hyperreal. This is the claustrophobic space in which the replica is better than the real thing, and here, of course, one thing means another because someone in authority says so. It is an airless world in which an actor in a McDonald's commercial can sincerely talk about the fresh-chopped salad he claims to be able to get any time he wants. It is the airless world in which another actor, in the White House commercial, can talk sincerely about a booming economy, or brave freedom-fighters, or an impenetrable defense against nuclear attack, or any other politically expedient script. This is the schizophrenic space of the new cyclorama, where the only relationship between events is the continuity of airtime, a TV world in which everything is constantly replaced by what appears to be something else, but is only its double.*

*On one of these news talk-shows, ABC's Nightline, at the time of the sale of Irises, anchor Ted Koppel invited Tom Wolfe and Peter Max to give their views on the event. Koppel's choice of guests gives us a pretty good idea of his view of the art world. Max and Wolfe, simulated representations of artist and critic, near identical in their comic costumes of creativity, spoke the same empty language of self-aggrandizement as critique. Both wore white suits, one a bow tie with small spots over a striped shirt, the other a regular tie with large spots over a striped shirt.*

*Both sold product like crazy: Wolfe promoted his new book, Max his new marketing arrangement. Wolfe, the critic, retained a certain reserve, using humorously old observations about conspicuous consumption as his distancing device. Max, the artist, was more immediate, invoking the aura of pure expression as his validation. Neither remembered to remember van Gogh.*

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## SPACE VAMPIRES

By Thomas Lawson

History is fascinating, it beguiles with endless possibilities of meaning. So much can be read into the patterning of its ebb and flow, of its gyrations and stillnesses, that dreamers and speculators of all kinds seek to read their fortune there. And since everyone wants the security of certain interpretation (for the security of its denial), phantasms of stability are built up or torn down with astonishing regularity. These illusions of stopped time feed on a desire for completion. Here, instead, is a roundabout story, a story with neither end nor beginning.

Today, a visit to either of the two surviving cycloramas in the United States, in Gettysburg and Atlanta, is a family affair. Both are housed in specially constructed buildings in public parks with a mission, the Gettysburg National Military Park solemnly educational, Grant Park less somber, but equally favored as a good place for quality time with the kids. Their other attractions aside, the two cycloramas provide healthy doses of important-seeming information in enjoyable, bite-sized chunks. There are displays of Civil War artifacts in the entrance halls of both buildings—uniforms, weaponry, even, in Atlanta, a locomotive that saw service for the Confederate army. Not to be outdone, Gettysburg, in summer, has an autograph version of Lincoln's famous address on view. Both buildings have little dioramas to familiarize visitors with Civil War battle history—the litany of names, times, dates. Then both have a ten-minute warm-up film show, Atlanta's rehearsing some of these names and fitting them within a detailed narrative of one day's fighting, Gettysburg's discussing Lincoln's address. Only now, thoroughly prepared, may the



The Hall of Architecture, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. Photo: Thomas Lawson.

visitor ascend into the cyclorama itself.

The paintings are huge, originally about 50 feet high with a circumference of 400 feet. Time has trimmed something of their girth; each now measures only 350-odd feet around, and the Gettysburg painting is down to a mere 26 feet in height. Over the years both have suffered from neglect and from unfortunate care; they have been rained on, snowed on, painted on, and built on. They have been restored so extensively that their original appearance is in doubt. In order to finesse this credibility problem, the paintings are now presented as theatrical events, the visitor's gaze carefully directed. Light and sound take the audience through the narrative of each battle, again piling on incident and detail. The Gettysburg show ends, obviously enough, with an actorish reading of Lincoln's speech dedicating the battlefield graveyard; detail succumbs to the expected ideology, and the visitors file out in the assurance that civilization held fast and ultimately triumphed. The Atlanta show, located at the site of a major and still regionally resented defeat, has a more difficult time drawing to a conclusion, preferring to lavish fact and anecdote until the tour of the painting is over. Stunned by these torrents of picayune detail, the visitor leaves both cycloramas overburdened with information, yet uncertain of the actual, rather than mythic, significance of each battle to the course of the war—each is advertised as the major turning point. Nor does the visitor get a chance to consider the causes, the meaning, of the war itself. But then, what should we expect? These cycloramas, after all, are merely weird relics of an early phase of mass culture, a phase when art was on-

ly beginning to assert itself as having a different intention, a separate, potentially more disruptive discourse, than previously imagined. The cycloramas, unmanageable hybrids of pre-Modern painting and what were then the latest display technologies, exist now only as curious patched-up dinosaurs, akin in level of sophistication, on both ideological and illusionistic grounds, to the older rides at Disneyland. They now seem somewhat stilted in manner, mechanically obvious, ludicrous in scale ("The Battle of Atlanta" would fill the top floor of New York's Whitney Museum of American Art.) And although they are still fun, it is easy to understand, in retrospect, why they were obliterated by the technological advances of motion pictures. Originally housed in outsized tents and sham castles, they were swept away by the triumph of the picture palace.

The idea of making a large painting in the round was never merely an art idea, but a result of the conjunction of art and the descriptive sciences typical of the latter part of the 18th century. In an age increasingly preoccupied with the possibilities of representation, in all fields of human endeavor, the search was on for systems and machines that would encode the visible world. Topographical views of incredible detail, made possible by the camera obscura, were popular, but something more was wanted. That desire for intensity and accuracy led eventually to the camera and the development of photographic processes, but before that it led to the panorama painting, with its all-encompassing visual sensation.

The actual idea of how to accomplish this miracle of illusion first came to Robert Barker,

a failed miniaturist languishing in a debtors' prison. The light coming down to his cell from a hidden source in the roof was his inspiration. On his release he moved to Edinburgh, where, in 1787, he filed a patent for panoramas. His first attempt was a watercolor view of Edinburgh from the observatory on top of Calton Hill, and it worked well enough that he moved to London to set up business. There, with his son as partner, he quickly realized that a completely round painting would require its own building for proper display. The design the Barkers developed for this became the standard for all the panoramas and cycloramas to come—a fantasy shell with an ornate doorway leading to a dark passage and stair, which in turn led to a raised platform surrounded by the walls of the huge painting, which made a circle around it. Climbing up onto this platform out of the darkness of the entrance hall, the viewer emerged in what by contrast seemed an extraordinarily bright space, which contained, as far as the eye could see, and in every direction, a vista. The Barkers' first joint effort, a view of London, became an instant hit when it opened, in 1792. In an age that delighted in a well-crafted view as the pleasing expression of a reasonable order, the panorama provided reason touched with magic. By 1794 it was so popular that the Barkers were able to build, in Leicester Square, a more elaborate building with space for two separate views. The panorama boom was on.

*Two footnotes to the story so far.*



The Barkers, familiar with the logic of imprisonment, devised their walled-in reasonable illusion at roughly the same time that Jeremy Bentham, seeking utility, not magic, was devising his illusion of totalitarian reason, the ideal jailhouse called the panopticon. Both panorama and panopticon are circular, windowless buildings, with an observation tower raised in their center; both are lit from a hidden source above. Both privilege the view from the center, indeed both make an ideological case for the centrality of the all-seeing eye of the individual viewer, who stands in for all viewers. In both, that privileged viewer feels all-seeing, omnipotent—yet this is an illusion. Clarity obscures.



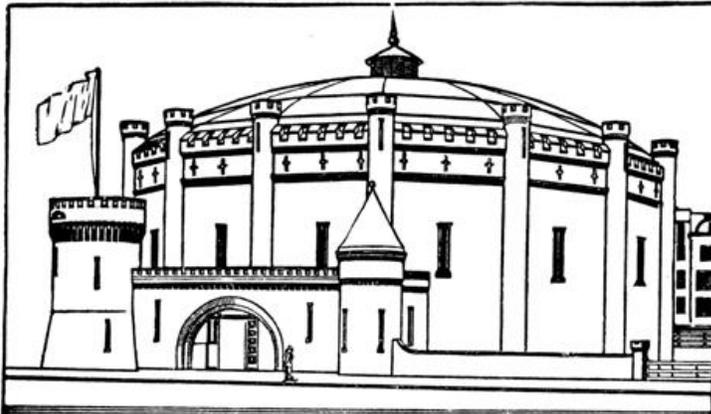
At the height of their popularity, the no-longer-bankrupt Barkers hired a young artist who was later forced to resign from the Royal Academy after exhibiting another artist's work as his own. Of necessity, he then pursued a career as a restorer and faker of pictures for a nascent art market.

The Barkers and their immediate imitators remained content with an elaborated topography, and soon their public could travel to places dis-

tant in time and place—from Pompeii to the Swiss Alps, from Constantinople to Paris—and never leave Leicester Square. It required little imagination, however, to think of enlarging the genre's potential audience by enlarging its scope, by recording events as accurately as places. In no time, the panoramic recreation of battle scenes outstripped in popularity the recreation of views. The public quickly learned to demand action, news of daring deeds from around the world. (In fact, the first attempt to import a panorama to New York, a view of Versailles installed facing Chambers Street in 1818, failed at the box office. This panorama is now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.) Napoleon soon recognized the political value of this burgeoning fascination, ordering that his artists represent his victories in the round. Pictured thus, his conquests engulfed the viewer in the press of immediate action, allowing the public, reliving the struggle from what could be imagined to be Napoleon's own vantage point, to identify further with the populist emperor. The success of this propaganda tool lay in its all-encompassing illusion, which Napoleon's artists heightened by adding apparently real trees, walls, cannons, and even bodies to the space between viewing platform and canvas. This Napoleonic intervention was a significant one, changing the panorama from curio to a form of agit prop. At this point, therefore, it is worth suggesting a distinction, reserving the original term "panorama" for the expanded landscape invented by Barker, and using "cyclorama" to describe those much more elaborate reconstructions of events that Bonaparte did so much to popularize. The irony is that the second-most-popular cyclorama subject in the

19th century was Waterloo. (The first was that other defeat, the Crucifixion.)

The panorama/cyclorama remained the most popular of art entertainment until the 1890s, despite competition from other exotic forms of presentation, from Daguerre's diorama, of the 1820s, with its seemingly miraculous transformations by means of colored lights (it was in fact dubbed the *Salle des Miracles*), to the "moving pictures" of John Banvard's "Panorama of the Mississippi River," a mechanical scroll that took two hours to unroll, and that toured America and Europe in the middle of the century as part of a carny show. At one time there were thirteen panoramas in Paris alone, and most major cities, and many small ones, boasted at least one. The 1870s and 1880s were the medium's golden age, a period when these gigantic and complex behemoths traveled the West, on occasion even reaching its eastern outpost in Australia. But these years of the cyclorama's triumph were also the years during which Manet and the rest inaugurated a new way of looking at and thinking about painting, a way that would make it seem more vitally connected to the realities of modern life. The clumsy machinery of the cycloramas' illusions proved unready for this kind of adaptation to changing circumstances. Furthermore, by the 1870s artists and their public were beginning to rethink their relationship. Patronage had become a puzzle. In France, the salon system was in crisis. The artist-as-maverick-showman solution—one thinks of Courbet and Turner as much as of the academy-trained cyclorama painters—required a patience with bureaucracy, not to mention an access to capital, beyond most artists. This was the period that saw the first stir-



The building erected to house Paul Philippoteaux's cyclorama "The Battle of Gettysburg," 1864, in Boston. From *Cyclorama of the Battle of Gettysburg*, 1864, reprinted 1984 by the National Park Service.

rings of an art market as we know it; outside the museum, paying admission to see a painting would soon be a thing of the past. The cyclorama as a living form would become extinct. The golden age of the dinosaurs happened in spite of what was imminent, then, and in part as a paradoxical response to a daunting political reality.

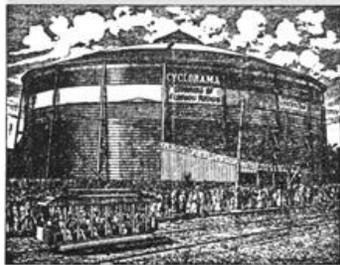
France had been defeated by Germany in the Franco-Prussian War, yet it was the French who initially flocked to the new cycloramas of the war, seeking consolation in the heroic moments that they could snatch from their despair. The market may have been seeking reality, but the public still wanted the possibility of illusion, wanted the comfort of the big lie. The most successful, most famous cyclorama of the period was "The Siege of Paris," by the father-and-son team of Félix and Paul Philippoteaux, which stood on the Champs-Élysées throughout the 1870s and into the '80s. Respected professionals with a steady record at the Salons, the Philippoteaux produced many big battle cycloramas during those years, and it was they who prepared the first version of "The Battle of Gettysburg" for display in Chicago in 1882. The son, Paul, returned to this piece in the following two years to touch up some problems that had vexed veterans' groups, and a new, improved version, the remains of which are now at Gettysburg, went on display in Boston from 1884 to 1892.

In response to this French success with the ambiguities of history, German artists quickly realized that money could be made exploiting a war that their side had actually won. And as befits the victors, their work was generally admired as surpassing all previous efforts, on both artistic and technical levels. The most notable German work of the period, Anton von Werner's "Battle of Sedan," which was unveiled in Berlin in 1883, pushed the effects of illusion to new heights through the use of a kind of relief modeling that attracted extra sparkle to the picture's highlights. This painting enjoyed a brief moment of political scandal when the kaiser, on opening night, discovered that he was not included. Imagine, a painting that encouraged the illusion that every spectator was an important participant in the field, in a position of command, but implicitly left a vacuum by absenting the very representative of command, the kaiser himself. This was quickly repaired, and the work went on to enjoy great success. The Germans, like the French, exported their work; they also exported their artists. It was at this time that the entrepreneur William Wehner set up the American Panorama Company in Milwaukee, staffing it with artists trained in the academies of Munich and Düsseldorf. For two decades, Milwaukee thrived as the Hollywood of the cyclorama industry, producing countless historical and religious pictures for traveling shows. "The Battle of Atlanta" was one of these, opening in Detroit in early 1887 before moving

on to Minneapolis, Indianapolis, Chattanooga, and finally Atlanta itself, in 1892.

Although in an odd way site-specific now, these things were never intended to be so specifically placed. The artists made money on tickets, not on commissions or private sales, so they sought out their public, and sought to give that public what it wanted. And what it wanted was the grand illusion. It wanted the spectacle to seem uncannily real—entertaining, but educational. As a result the artists went to extraordinary lengths to ensure that every detail was correct. The Philippoteaux came over to America to do research for

## "ATLANTA'S PET."



## CYCLOPAMA.

"THE BUILDING on Edgewood Avenue, Atlanta, where the Cyclorama of the Battle of Atlanta was displayed in 1892-1893 . . . . Reproduced from a photostatic print taken from a page of the newspaper ATLANTA CONSTITUTION published August 30, 1891."

—From Wilbur Kurtz, *The Atlanta Cyclorama*, booklet history and guide.

their Gettysburg piece, interviewing survivors and surveying the actual site. They even went so far as to build an elevated platform on the battlefield from which to make sketches, and to have panoramic photographs taken, making an ideal, *plein air* simulacrum of the enclosed "picture without boundaries" that they intended to construct back in the studio in Paris. Wehner's German team was no less thorough, also building an observation tower on site from which to recreate the scene. Close on a hundred years after Robert Barker first worked on his panoramic view of Edinburgh, the topographical desire for totality reached something of an apogee with these meticulous renditions of the moment. The uncanny effect of reality these pictures sought came not only from this overzealous attention to every

detail, but from the judicious use of familiar convention, for the battle scenes were ordered according to the tenets of the academy.

*Two more footnotes to the story so far.*



In 1870, a group of enlightened art patrons in New York founded the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with the idea of building a collection that would illustrate the entire history of art. Since they did not have enough money even to start this project seriously, they were forced to reconsider their objectives in some detail. The result was a decision to seek an educationally complete museum through a kind of sleight of hand, by filling the space with copies. They decided to order plaster casts and plaster models of the masterpieces of Western civilization, a bewilderingly encyclopedic array of quotations. In its utter collapse of distinctions of place and time, this procedure would bring the young museum to the threshold of pastiche. Two bequests in the 1880s made it possible; however, and by 1895 a collection of over 2,000 replicas was nearing completion. Ten years later a new board—with real money, Morgan money—backed away from this shadow world, and started to acquire the real thing.



Between 1881 and 1883 Vincent van Gogh, a very different kind of realist from the plaster-cast modelers, was living mostly in The Hague, where he confronted a very different shadow world. Already branded a failure in two previously chosen careers, he now wanted to become an artist; his father wanted him committed to the madhouse. Dismissive of most of the artists in town, van Gogh was nevertheless willing, always, to consider landscape, looking for an essential truth in the representation of the earth. During this time, most likely in 1882, he visited the "Panorama Mesdag," newly opened in a nearby seaside town. This work, which still survives, is relatively modest, a painting of the small town and its beach. Structurally, it is true to form: one enters through a dark passageway, which brings one up into what appears to be a sand dune. Beyond lies the town, the beach, and some fishing boats under a storm-laden sky. Van Gogh found the picture flawless, momentarily beguiled by the security of its conventional realism.

*And one more footnote—this one bringing us up to the present.*



The November 1987 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* ran an interesting story about the current situation in the production and marketing of African tribal art. Turns out that the bulk of this work entering the United States is brought in by clans of "run-



ners," who use age-old smuggling routes to bypass export rules, then sell their wares to dealers and collectors, often out of dingy rooms in Times Square hotels. The runners like to keep their bases covered, so what they have for sale varies dramatically from the cheapest machine-made rip-off for the tourist trade to the occasional piece with a genuine tribal pedigree. The bulk of what they have, however, is what Nicholas Lemann, the author of the article, points out would normally be called "fake." This of course suggests that a great many, perhaps even most, of the objects called African tribal art in private and public American collections are in a sense suspect. What can this mean?

Rehearsing a little history, Lemann reminds us that Pablo Picasso and the other early Moderns found value in what they saw as the spirituality of African art. As this interest inevitably created a market, standards had to be invented by which to rank the new collectibles so that Western values, cash values, could be applied to them. Pretty soon an object's ritual use became its badge of authenticity. A piece that had been part of a ritual, that had been "danced," was worth something; one that had not was merely a souvenir. The distinction worked well at first, while the balance of supply and demand remained steady. However, as the modern world became more modern, more people wanted to buy a connection to the soul, and sought it particularly in tribal carving (and in expressionist painting). This had the predictable effect of shrinking resources and raising prices. The problem in the tribal-carving market today is that the expansion of the modern world has created market growth but has also all but destroyed the societies that make and use the masks and totems. Now these objects tend to appear, pro forma, at a variety of independence days, victory days, birthdays—any vaguely ritual gathering that will enable a dealer to say, with a straight face, that the pieces have been danced. At the same time, an increasing number of carvers, aware of the desires of the buyers in the "First World," make copies of objects of acknowledged power—perhaps objects that they themselves made years before. Since tribal art by its very nature is generic rather than individualist, who is to say that the copy is less "authentic" than the original, since the original itself was only a version of a traditional form? Whatever one thinks of this, the upshot, as Lemann remarks, is that little of the African tribal art available on the market today can be considered "genuine" in the usual sense.

If we relax the standards applied to these



objects, and judge them as we might judge contemporary Western art, their lack of being "danced," or their very cursory stab at it, begins to get even more interesting. According to Lemann, various westerners who have explored the field report that the studios of many of the successful producers of tribal art in the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Mali, Liberia, and Cameroon are fully furnished with almost the latest coffee-table books and glossy magazines, just an information step behind the studios of New York, Los Angeles, or Cologne. These artists have simply changed patrons. Since they can no longer make fetishes for their own vanishing native culture, they now make fetishes for ours, working, like many of their peers in the West, to satisfy a market demand for readily recognizable, easily comprehended facsimiles of the authentic.

When you come to a town like Alice Springs, you come to a place on the edge of what is euphemistically known as the civilized world. Far from the centers of Western culture, Alice has meaning only in terms of commerce. The town is little more than a truck stop and railway depot in the hot red heart of the Australian desert. It is rarely a final destination but rather a transfer point, a place to make connections. It is a prosperous enough little town, boasting a modernized downtown strip made mall-like with brick sidewalks and plants arranged in wooden boxes. A block away runs a river, dry most of the year, and here, under the shade of the gum trees that grow in the parched waterway, sit groups of aboriginals, dusty, malnourished, apparently despondent. In a sense, Alice Springs is not just a transfer point but also a border town, a place where the connection you can make is between two very different cultures.

The white man's Alice is ruled by time, the day regimented by the schedules of the airlines and the railroad. An invisible network of arrivals and departures provides the daily structure of meaning, and nothing but that structure counts. Even the museums, and there are museums of a sort here, attach themselves to this transitoriness: one celebrates early aviation, another the automobile, a third the telegraph. These museums do not attempt to provide a real framework with which to understand the place. Instead, they are content to serve as repositories of obsolete machinery, chambers in which evidence of the passing through space and the passing of time are isolated, disconnected, and rendered safe from the questioning gaze of history. The great desert that surrounds this clock-tied but history-free settlement is often described by white Australians as a place unburdened by culture, an idyll of nothingness. The vast expanses of red earth,

dotted with the bluish green of the spinifex and the occasional gum tree, roll out under an intensely blue sky. Here the eye of Western civilization can see little trace of itself or of its past. All it sees is unstructured time—a perfect place for recreation, and for viewing the wilderness as spectacle, as a photo opportunity en route to discover "the essence of Australia."

But this desert is not only the empty place of white desire. It is also, and more meaningfully, the complex landscape surrounding Uluru, the navel of the aboriginal universe—in its English name, Ayers Rock. This great red outcrop is the point of origin of a people's world view. In many ways, the dusty men and women in the dry riverbed have been made outcasts in their own home. Their culture lacks the idea of property, and it is only since the '70s that they have begun to demand the right to possess their ancestral land in the litigious way that the white authorities can understand. Yet they have always possessed this land, which is precisely mapped out in the dreamtime stories they tell each other over the generations. Unlike the narratives that we construct, these stories do not present time as linear. They present time and space together as an open terrain. The dreamtime stories tell of the travels of a variety of mythic and totemic beings across the desert plains. They can be interpreted as the history of a nomadic people and of their encounters with other groups, and with natural disasters. They can also be read as road maps, describing the ways across the desert and locating watering holes and good shelter, and warning of hazards. They are about survival on both a practical and a cultural level. Daily life is understood as part of a larger history, and not as a mechanically measured series of disconnected moments.

There are six art galleries in Alice. This is a town in which you can find a version of anything you want, and a picture to go with it. Some of the art available is made by present-day aboriginal artists. Traditionally, these artists are keepers of the dreamtime stories, for the patterns they paint or mark out on the desert floor or on the walls of a cave function as reminders as the tale unfolds. The work therefore has a use, tied in with its ritual function. In the past, the art had no other value, and the images were as fugitive as the desert sands. Even the cave paintings were temporary, canceled out by each succeeding year's performance of the ritual of collective remembering. But since the coming of the first white explorers this has changed, for the whites wanted mementos and souvenirs; the idea of a history held simply in the memories of its participants was too abstract for them, they wanted to have something to hold, something to remember by. And so the artists, being accommodating, transferred parts of their patterning onto bark, turning some of their dreams into currency. Later,

in the early '70s, a group of younger aboriginal artists working in Papunya, a settlement about half a day from Alice, took this a step further, re-presenting the same fragments of dreamtime imagery in acrylics on canvas. This shrewd, informed move repositioned their work, removing it from the ethnographic museums and craft shops and setting it within the more valuable (in cash terms) confines of the art museums. These paintings, typically large scale with an all-over pattern made of an accumulation of discrete dots, meshed perfectly with the concerns of Western painters of the time. And the artists continue to play out an elaborate ballet, reflecting on the disabled state of their own traditions while toying with the grand ruin of another tradition that is totally foreign to them.

Another group of aboriginal artists, working collaboratively, has effected a similar transformation of aspects of their traditional rituals, re-presenting them for a basically white audience in the art museum, as performance art. In the process, the artists lay bare our prejudices and preconceptions while keeping their own secrets to themselves. Watching a piece by the Ramingining Performance Group is a confusing and contradictory experience in which expectations are overturned, assumptions challenged. In the hallowed interior of the museum—for, like the Papunya paintings, this is museum-quality work—an area is taped off and filled with sand. At the announced time a number of men and boys in loincloths, bodies daubed with white powder, enter the arena. At the same time, a group of very skinny, hungry-looking women and girls in ragged black shifts gather along the taped edge. During the performance the actors talk back and forth among themselves, laughing. Often it seems as though they are trying to decide what to do next, or maybe trying to remember. Now and then a seated man blows into a didgeridoo and the women shuffle back and forth, clapping time. The boys play in the sand, digging a hole, making a mound. Suddenly a yellow plastic bucket is brought on, filled with water, and emptied over one of the men, washing off his white dusting. The performance is over, and the mostly white crowd shuffles and claps, uncertain in its response. Expecting something fabulous, be it a spiritual event or a religious spectacle, they have instead watched some poor, unhealthy-looking people do nothing much, and have been made aware of themselves as voyeurs. Further, some recognize references to the work of earlier, Western performance groups like Grand Union in the use of casual, everyday actions and movements, and in the mixing of children and adults as equal performers; they recognize these references, but are unsure what to do with them, since primitive rituals are not supposed to be influenced by the activities of sophisticated New

Yorkers in the basement of the Judson Church.

At the same time that these aboriginal artists were rethinking their relationship to the two cultures that provide their context, a Dutch artist by the name of Henk Guth was rethinking his relationship to European culture. A decidedly minor participant in the Parisian scene of the '50s and early '60s, he apparently wanted to emulate Gauguin and voyage to exotic and tropical parts, but at first got only as far as Melbourne. By 1966 he had made it out to Alice, as far from the corrupting influences of Montmartre as he could imagine. There, inspired by the vastness of the outback, he continued to paint, his work becom-

ing more descriptive, in a naively conventional way, as the years passed. At a time when artists like Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer were going into the western deserts of North America in search of a space in which to develop alternative ways of working with the landscape, ways that would at least address the shortcomings of the marketplace as an arbiter in art matters, Guth proceeded as though all that was needed was a different subject matter. In 1971, a year after Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, Guth had an epiphany. Recalling the strange tourist attraction in The Hague called the "Panorama Mesdag," the same painting van Gogh had enjoyed in the 1880s, he

had the idea of doing something similar, a large circular painting of the desert, to be viewed from a raised central platform like a lookout. To effect this project, he had to build, and what he built is a strange octagonal tower, with battlements and a central spire rising behind a more conventional structure that could house a shop or a restaurant. There are three main rooms to the Studio Guth: the first contains an eclectic and at times condescending collection of aboriginal artifacts and bric-a-brac; the second, a preposterous room decorated with red plush and a tiled fountain, houses what is described as a permanent collection of Guth's own paintings. The third room, directly over this funeral parlor, is the room of the panorama itself.

Climbing the spiral staircase into the panorama one comes upon a tremendously undistinguished rendition of the desert landscape laid out in a wrap-around painting that measures 20 feet high by 200 feet in circumference. Between the viewing platform and the canvas lies an odd no-man's zone littered with sand and dead branches. The room is airless, the illusion meager. Looking at this strangely naive work is a puzzling experience: it is not good enough, or crazy enough, to compel respect, not bad enough to raise a laugh. Thoroughly mediocre, thoroughly conventional, it is yet raised in triumph in its own castle out in the back of beyond, an act of outrageous hubris. Inevitably, looking at this embattled outpost of Paris, one thinks of that other lonely stand against the corruptions of the market, Don Judd's Marfa complex, boot camp turned art bunker in the Texas plain. Both enterprises want to claim a certain authenticity in relationship to their place in the world, want to be understood as site-specific. And yet both have their sights raised somewhere else entirely.

In its ineffectual way, the "Panorama Guth" enacts a scenario of control. Within its walls unfolds a delusion of mastery. The lower galleries mimic the function of the museum, inventorying various objects and the artist's response to them. The relics and rubbish are collected and classified in one room, the artist's renditions and reworkings, his interpretations, hang in the other. The wild freedom Guth sought as he fled Europe for the desert has been broken into tiny fragments, little mementos; they have been ordered and placed in full view, under control. And when we ascend the staircase to the panorama, that blind panopticon of the desert, we stand there, in the artist's place, proudly surveying, and possessing the land as far as the eye can see, which is as far as the curtain of stretched canvas. Guth's ambition is utterly defeated by its own timidity. All that it can possess, all that it can control, is this pallid representation, locked up safe in its white clapboard castle.

## PANORAMA GUTH

ALICE SPRINGS — CENTRAL AUSTRALIA



A panoramic painting of Central Australia by artist, Henk Guth, depicting the many scenic attractions.

60 metres in circumference and 6 metres high.

● ALSO AN ABORIGINAL MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY.

Studio Guth advertising pamphlet, Alice Springs.



Paul Philippoteaux, "The Battle of Gettysburg—  
"Pickett's Charge" cyclorama (detail), 1884, oil on  
canvas, 26' high,  
356' in circumference.



*Two final footnotes on the story so far.*



On the day that Sherrie Levine's show opened at the Mary Boone Gallery, New York, last September, the *New York Times* ran a front-page story exposing presidential-candidate Joseph Biden's wholesale appropriation of a speech by British Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock. There was also a story about Levine's show in the back of the paper, in which she was quoted as saying, "It's not that I think nothing's original, I just think it's not so easy to know what original means." I think I know what she was getting at, but a few weeks later the *Newsday* columnist Sydney Schanberg, noting the conjunction of these two stories, took it contrarily, writing in his newspaper that Levine was no better than other rip-off artists, fakers, and forgers—no better than Joe

Biden. It is certainly true that Levine would have been thrown out of the Royal Academy in the 1840s, forced, like Robert Barker's onetime assistant, to pursue a career as a forger and restorer.



In 1889 van Gogh painted a picture of irises during a lucid spell in the sanatorium. This past November 11, the painting was sold at auction for a total of \$53.9 million including various fees and taxes, an extraordinary sum for a tiny sliver of authenticity. Increasingly, the only value expressed in a public way by art is a financial one, and the only art that enters the mainstream discourse is art that can be quantified. It is as though the art market values only art that lives in a time warp, a free-trade zone in which value floats, like the dollar on the in-

ternational exchange, looking for its ever-changing level. The anxiety this induces creates its own backlash: in an attempt to anchor the value of specific art commodities, or, better, to peg them to a rising curve, manikin authorities are produced to manufacture simple little historical narratives. These stories of influence and neglect do not actually tie the objects in question to any history, and thus to any possibly useful meaning, but, rather, chain them together in genealogies that continue to drift free of sense.

The staggering sum for the van Gogh is more than enough to buy several handsome pieces of top-of-the-line military equipment, the kind of equipment only madmen lust after. Only vast accumulations of capital, by corporate entities rather than human be-



ings, can now afford to buy into the authenticity market. The rest of us must do with imitations and surrogates, or tune into the TV-news talk shows to watch the experts discuss the meaning of real events as they soar into the empyrean of the hyperreal. This is the claustrophobic space in which the replica is better than the real thing, and here, of course, one thing means another because someone in authority says so. It is an airless world in which an actor in a McDonald's commercial can sincerely talk about the fresh-chopped salad he claims to be able to get any time he wants. It is the airless world in which another actor, in the White House commercial, can talk sincerely about a booming economy, or brave freedom-fighters, or an impenetrable defense against nuclear attack, or any other

politically expedient script. This is the schizophrenic space of the new cyclorama, where the only relationship between events is the continuity of airtime, a TV world in which everything is constantly replaced by what appears to be something else, but is only its double.

On one of these news talk-shows, ABC's *Nightline*, at the time of the sale of *Irises*, anchor Ted Koppel invited Tom Wolfe and Peter Max to give their views on the event. Koppel's choice of guests gives us a pretty good idea of his view of the art world. Max and Wolfe, simulated representations of artist and critic, near identical in their comic costumes of creativity, spoke the same empty language of self-aggrandizement as critique. Both wore white suits, one a bow tie with small spots over a striped shirt, the

other a regular tie with large spots over a striped shirt. Both sold product like crazy: Wolfe promoted his new book, Max his new marketing arrangement. Wolfe, the critic, retained a certain reserve, using humorously old observations about conspicuous consumption as his distancing device. Max, the artist, was more immediate, invoking the aura of pure expression as his validation. Neither remembered to remember van Gogh. □

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The image that marks the footnotes of this article is a Fatti about his female figure from Ghana, in wood, 16 1/2" high. Collection of the Baltimore Museum of Art, purchased as a gift of Robert A. and Margot W. Mikh, in honor of Janet and Alan Wurtzelberger. The museum has determined that this about his, originally thought to be early 20th century, was carved recently for export.

American Panorama Company, "The Battle of Atlanta" cyclorama (detail), 1885-88, oil on Belgian linen, 50' high, 356' in circumference