

Habitat

May 5 – June 10, 2017

Interpretive Keys:

A Conversation between Luis Jacob and Parker Kay

This is an edited transcript from a conversation between Luis Jacob and Parker Kay that was recorded on March 29, 2017 on the occasion of Luis Jacob's exhibition *Habitat* at Gallery TPW.

Parker Kay: In 1955, the Bank of Toronto and the Dominion Bank joined in a corporate merger. By 1962, the amalgamation was complete, and the newly founded Toronto Dominion Bank was set on defining itself through a new visual identity. On the recommendation of Phyllis Lambert, Mies van der Rohe was commissioned to oversee the design of two skyscrapers that would replace the Beaux Arts Bank of Toronto head office building. Construction began on the first tower at 66 Wellington in 1964 and was eventually completed in 1967. The result was a stark black hulking monolith soaring 56 stories high—22 stories higher than its closest competitor: the headquarters of the Canadian Bank of Commerce. Arthur C. Clarke uses the black monolith in his *Space Odyssey* book series to represent an artifact from the superior intelligence of the Star Children. As a literary device, Clarke uses the monolith as a way to propel the narrative forward as a guiding force toward the advancement of technology and human progress.

I like to imagine a family visiting the observation deck of the Bank of Commerce building. I picture them looking east towards the cathedrals on Church Street, only to turn around to look west and have their field of view dominated by the first TD Tower. Did they have a similar reaction that primitive man had when he encountered the black monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*? I actually visited the Commerce Court North building today and was so surprised with how strikingly beautiful it is while also totally disappearing among the buildings that now hang over it. Looking at it today, it is hard to imagine that it was the tallest building in the city for thirty years.

Luis Jacob: It was the tallest building in the British Commonwealth for those thirty years.

PK: Exactly! Picture this hulking tower, this black void, representing a fundamental shift in the visual identity of the city for those living in it. This structure ushered in a new ideology for Toronto. The International Style of architecture had been circulating in the United States for some years with examples like Mies's own Seagram building in New York City; however, not only was TD Tower 1 one of the first instances of International Style on Canadian soil, it was also one of Mies van der Rohe's purest examples of his style.

What I find really interesting are the artifacts that were produced out of this moment in time. When the Bank of Toronto building was demolished to make way for the TD



Luis Jacob, *Sightlines*, 2017. Vintage postcards, reference image. Courtesy of the artist.

Centre, some of the columns that lined the front façade of the building were salvaged by Herbert Spencer Clark and the Toronto Architectural Conservancy, which eventually made their way to the Guild Inn. Once the columns were arranged on the Guild Inn's property to make the Greek Amphitheatre, as it is called today, it is as if they represented Ancient Greece more than early 20th-century Toronto. In these moments of change, you can observe a drastic shift in how we situate these objects in time. With the arrival of the TD Tower, the survival of those columns became a signifier of that period of Toronto's architecture being cast into the past—a recession into time reserved for the old. What do you think that moment represented in terms of disrupting, or shifting, Toronto's sense of cultural identity?

LJ: It's a moment that is difficult to imagine today. But it remains discernible in the *Sightlines* series of postcards—this moment of transition from a city whose most prominent features in the skyline were the Canadian Bank of Commerce headquarters and the Royal York hotel, to a city now defining itself as “new”: modern, international, and cosmopolitan. What did people in Toronto think at that moment? Today, it seems like a sudden break in time. The architecture of the TD Centre Tower asserts, “that was then, this is now.” People frequently remark on how conservative Toronto used to be, how much of a cultural backwater it was, and how different this is from the Toronto we know today—a city defined by multiculturalism and explosive change.

That moment of the mid-1960s appears to mark a different kind of city coming into being, the city that you and I might recognize as the place we live in today.

What I find striking in your description is the idea that this new city that is coming into being, symbolized by this piece of Modern architecture, simultaneously implies the coming-into-ruin of another city. The idea of “the New” implies the invention of “the Old”—right?—which I am tempted to interpret as the invention of “the Repressed.” Today it’s nearly impossible to visualize the old Bank of Toronto building at the corner of King and Bay. I have a postcard of that building and it’s almost unimaginable that this, too, was in Toronto. To have the columns of the demolished building left at the Guild Inn underscores the becoming-ruin that’s synonymous with the becoming-new.

PK: After the 2005 riots in Paris’s suburbs, there was a lot of conversation surrounding the role that Modernist highrise projects had in cultivating the alienation that lead to the riots. Le Corbusier called houses “machines for living” and this ideology became the guiding force of France’s suburban development after World War Two. Therefore, it is not surprising that the site of such social upheaval would emerge from the foundation of a failed ideology that proposed a new way of living. I only use this as an example to indicate the degree to which buildings like TD Tower 1 were accompanied by this type of Modernist ideology and perhaps that was a contributing factor to the speed in which the buildings that preceded it were pushed

into the past. It reminds me of your notion of the “empty lot,” in that perhaps before the first steel beam could even be laid “the old” had to be completely erased in order to make room for a structure whose ideology was so strong and in such stark contrast with what preceded it.

LJ: I’m tempted to think of the TD Centre Towers not so much as a real break from the past than as a symbol for the break with the past that Toronto defines itself by. It’s more of an archetype rather than simply being a historically singular event. So much of Toronto’s downtown is Victorian: much of the residential neighborhoods in the city centre belong to a Victorian urban fabric; and in much of Queen Street West you can still feel this palpable Victorian texture. It’s worth remembering how “modern” Victorian society was. To us, it might seem old and dusty, but, in fact, Victorian society was characterized by a belief in new inventions that would radically transform everyday life.

I was just reading the book *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture*, by Keith Walden, which is a history of the CNE [the Canadian National Exhibition]. It reminds me of the modern character of the pre-modern Victorian moment. The book begins with a news story from 1892, when a woman named Hannah Heron was struck and killed by one of Toronto’s new electric trolleys. Think about this: electric public transportation in 1892, in Toronto! She was struck because, in her world, nothing ever moved that

quickly—things moved as fast as the speed of a horse. When she crossed the street, she anticipated that this new object on the road would move at that speed. The driver of the streetcar also anticipated things to move at the speed that he was accustomed to. Both the driver and this pedestrian were unaccustomed to the new speed of the modern age—the electric age—resulting in a tragic accident. This Victorian trolley thus possesses a kind of modernity—a break with the past and the end of a form of life and of a type of city, that is also the beginning of a new form of life and a new type of city—that is shared with the TD Centre, more than seventy years later.

In principle, colonialism is proto-modern in the sense that it is defined by an analogous break in time. Colonialism is defined by a sense that “that was then, this is now”—a sense that something has to be repressed, erased, and misrecognized, so that the new can be built, as if for the first time. There is an uncanny similarity between the minimalism of the Toronto Purchase document drawn during the founding of the city in 1787 and the minimalism of Mies van der Rohe’s architecture. I find this “archetypal reductionism” extremely intriguing. It provides me with an interpretive key to understand phenomena around us, right here and today.

PK: One of the really interesting things about *Form Follows Fiction: Art and Artists in Toronto*, your exhibition at Art Museum at the University of Toronto, was being able to see those historic documents. Because on the one hand,



Parker Kay, *Toronto Purchase/TD Tower*, 2017. Illustration. Courtesy of the artist.

the viewer is forced to confront the absurdist simplicity of these documents and their assertion of a “new city”—colonialism manifested—and on the other hand, by being installed next to artworks, we start to see the aesthetic formalism of that colonialism. But I think you’re right, historically Toronto does seem to be in a repeating cycle of that kind of erasing in order to move forward, with the Toronto Purchase as a possible genesis point.

LJ: On the one hand, we can speak of the documents related to the founding of Toronto (then known as York) as deriving from real historical situations. On the other hand, they are also archetypal figures for a process that is

ongoing. These documents stand as allegorical figures for something that extends beyond their quality as historically singular examples.

PK: There is something that stands out about this particular moment. If we look at Toronto's architectural history, there does seem to be some continuity when moving from Georgian, to Victorian, to the Annex style house, and even into Neoclassical and Art Deco. All of those styles speak to a certain architectural lineage or visual identity. The downtown core, specifically, was dominated by highly ornamented Neoclassical or Art Deco buildings. However, even though the austerity of the Modernist skyscraper does keep in line with Toronto's history of erasure, there is something else that I can only attribute to the ideology of the movement.

LJ: Of Modernism?

PK: Of Modern Architecture specifically. To return again to Le Corbusier, his famous "Five Points Towards a New Architecture" text was not only a proposal for a new kind of architecture but also a new way to live. A way of living that stood in opposition to that which came before it. That type of ideology, paired with the mass demolition of historic architecture in Toronto during the late '60s and the early '70s seems to reveal a compelling connection.

LJ: This is an intuition worth pursuing: that there might exist a link between the ethos of Modern architecture—a

suspicion of the old, a will to “start again,” a desire to conceive of time as constituted by breaks rather than continuities or cycles—and colonial culture, which similarly assumes that the previous reality does not occupy the same continuum as the subsequent reality, that the old is so “other” that it cannot possibly cohabitate with the now. I am reminded of Le Corbusier’s ideas about whitewashing interior spaces with Ripolin, the first commercially available enamel paint. From our perspective, the desire to paint a fresh coat of white paint in every interior wall—understood as the will to erase the old, the souvenir, the sentimental—can appear to us and as a manifestation of French colonial culture.

In Toronto, we can utilize this fantasy of “the new” as an interpretive key to help us understand historical cases (such as the Toronto Purchase and the arrival of Mies van der Rohe’s architecture at the corner of King and Bay) but also certain artistic manifestations. This is something I attempted in the *Form Follows Fiction* exhibition by pairing Gordon Lebrecht’s *Get Hold of This Space* (1974) and Renée Van Halm’s *Anticipating the Eventual Emergence of Form* (1983) alongside the early town-planning documents from the late eighteenth century.

Today, every block on Yonge Street from Bloor to Dundas has a vacant lot. I don’t intend to romanticize or sentimentalize this razing of old Victorian architecture which, of course, is itself an erasure of something else,

extending to a time before colonialism. But I do want to explore these moments when an interpretive key arises, which allows us to perceive and make imaginative sense of manifestly different phenomena.

PK: I like this idea of the interpretive key. Speaking of Yonge Street, I've become really interested in the original Art Metropole building (241 Yonge Street). [Art Metropole is a Toronto artist-run centre dedicated to artist-initiated publications and multiples, founded in 1974 by the collective General Idea.]

LJ: Is it still there? I didn't even know!

PK: I went to visit it today. From what I can see the top two floors are vacant. The fourth floor should be used as a gallery – it is totally beautiful.

[Parker shows Luis the image on his phone]

LJ: No way! Yes, I remember a drawing of this building from the old stationery at Art Met.

PK: The top floor has this floor-to-ceiling bank of windows framed with a Roman arch and surrounded by Terracotta tiles. Now there is the Money Mart on the first floor and, you know, of course the Stag Shop is next door.

LJ: That's priceless.



Luis Jacob, *Album XIV* (detail), 2016–17. Image montage in plastic laminate, 104 panels. Image courtesy of the artist.

PK: To me this is a good example of the paradox of downtown. A similar case can be seen at 205 Yonge Street. Colloquially known as “the squished Pantheon,” the old Bank of Toronto building has been vacant for nineteen years. It is clear that this is one of Toronto’s architectural jewels but it seems like the city doesn’t know what to do with it. The strange thing is, this building has been transformed into a similar artifact as the columns that now rest at the Guild Inn. There is an inherent paradox within these structures because they act as a historical reference point, but then in their displacement from their original context they open themselves up to the development of new fictions. It is in this process of transforming into an artifact that these structures are dislodged from a solid historical grounding and begin to float through narrative possibilities. Buildings like the Art Metropole building and the 205 Yonge Street building have become an apparition, or cypher, of another time.

LJ: What I see in your photo has as much to do with a building that belongs to a past that I’m emotionally connected to—Art Metropole, General Idea—as with a way of seeing that you are exercising by walking around the city today, photographing and thinking about what you’re seeing. It is this way of looking at your environment that strikes me most powerfully about this image.

You know, it reminds me of photographs that Duane Linklater showed at the “This is Paradise: Art and Artists in Toronto” conference at the University of Toronto in 2015.



The original Art Metropole Building - 241 Yonge Street, 2017.
Courtesy of Parker Kay.

He spoke of searching for Rita Letendre's *Sunrise* mural, painted on the side of the Neill Wycik Residence building on Gerrard Street East. This immense painting—it is more than six stories tall—still exists and yet it is utterly invisible. Another building was subsequently constructed next to it, which completely covers the painting. The newer building at the same time preserves the painting and yet ironically renders it invisible. Duane visited the site and took these incredible photographs of the thin gap between the two buildings. You can't see anything inside the gap, but you do glimpse a way of looking for something in his environment. This is what I sense in your photograph: this desire to make something apparent that, on its own, exists only as a kind of spectral nothingness; a way of looking at the environment that animates that “nothing” into something.

PK: That's what is so intriguing about these buildings, these things are hidden while in plain sight. That dissonance is what draws me to it, in a way.

LJ: And that's what I find so poignant about that moment of arrival of the Modern in the TD Centre—this notion that “Toronto was once a backwater, but now we can join the cosmopolitan.” I'm sure it was thrilling, to see the birth of such a different paradigm around you. There must have been other cultural forms which also marked that moment—forms that, unlike a durable piece of architecture, we can no longer see: new styles of dress, of music, of dance, new habits of socializing. The Modern would have arrived in these different manifestations, and this is what people

must have sensed as the arrival of “the new.” I imagine it as being thrilling, but the pathos that I detect is the idea that you become “something” only by erasing something else—that you become newly cosmopolitan precisely by erasing what you are already actually like, sometimes by physically demolishing what is present here, in order to make way for “the new.”

What I sense both in your photograph and in Duane’s gesture is the suggestion that the birth of something doesn’t have to demolish what already exists. What if, in fact, the new paradigm consisted in archaeologically searching for the existing traces of the old as a “new” thing to connect to in one’s environment? In a global context defined by colonial relations, that would be an interesting cosmopolitanism for Toronto to aspire to.

PK: It’s interesting to think about all the ephemeral traces of that “new” you mentioned. The clothing, the music, the dance, have essentially been encased, or framed, within architecture—the only tangible trace of that particular “new.” Mies van der Rohe’s towers have, over time, become the structural referent for those intangible artifacts of culture—a window to look back at “the new” of that time. However, the TD Tower as framing device is not only a retrospective phenomenon, it has provided a type of urban framing since it was completed in 1967. Mies van der Rohe utilized the advancements in building technology, and the development of the steel framed skyscraper, to not only go higher than anything that preceded it but also

to incorporate more glass, therefore creating a translucent façade. With no need for bricks, the skyscraper created a new way of seeing the city. You could say that TD Tower 1 simultaneously represents a window to see the city through and a mirror that reflects the city around it. These metaphors open up a discussion of photography and the potential for the TD Centre to be a type of photographic apparatus, or lens, that produces images of the city. What I think is interesting about considering the TD Centre as a lens, or framing device, is that it highlights the ability for structures to carry meaning. I consider your use of image appropriation and collage as having a similar strategy of articulating the totality of meaning when the structure and content of an image are in concert.

LJ: You've constructed a resonant chain of signifiers! You began with architecture, considered as a kind of frame—and, specifically, with Modern steel-frame construction that renders architecture as a pure pane of glass without brick. From inside, this produces a framed view of the surrounding city; from outside, you now have a glass building that becomes a mirror reflecting the city around it. Branching from this idea of the framed window and the mirroring device, you continued into photographic discourse, photographic framing, and subsequently into appropriated photography.

This is fascinating! It points to an allegorical space that art in Toronto frequently circulates within. The framing devices that General Idea referred to in their work—



The Harbour, Toronto, Canada.

Photo: E. Leberg, John Frank Studios



The Harbour and Skyline, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Photo: E. Leberg, John Frank Studios

Luis Jacob, *Sightlines*, 2017. Vintage postcards, reference image. courtesy of the artist.

they even said that “General Idea” is, itself, a framing device. Mirrors appear and reappear in so much of this city’s artistic production, from the work of Annie MacDonell today, to that of Michael Snow’s work in the 1960s. Various manifestations of culture in Toronto are rendered intelligible in these terms. On the one hand, we might see the mirror in Michael Snow’s *Authorization* as a classic piece of self-referential conceptualism in the International Style. On the other hand, the artwork becomes an allegory for a kind of experience localized in a city like Toronto, a city long defined by the sense of a void at the heart of things, and for the need to render that void as a kind of image—a self-image! The work suggests that this is an act of “authorization”: the process of becoming an author. An instance of international Conceptual Art suddenly begins to resonate as an allegory of concrete experiences that are also quite localized.

This is very much explored in *Album XIV* at Gallery TPW. In particular, one section of the Album lays out a similar chain of signifiers. An architectural rendering of a Modernist building is inscribed on the site of the St. Lawrence neighbourhood, which was almost entirely obliterated during the early 1960s. Entire city blocks had been razed to the ground in an archetypal return of the “vacant lot” that we saw in the Toronto Purchase document. That image of the architectural rendering is paired in the Album with a photograph of a mirrored building—so that this parking lot, which is a void at the

heart of the urban fabric, and the mirror surface that is the finished building, are conflated together in the Album to produce a kind of archetypal continuum. As a result of this juxtaposition, the new building is seen to enact the void, which the prior demolition that had enabled it to be built had also enacted.

I like to think that this act of interpretation might open something for us, such that the vacant lot is experienced not only as a traumatic loss, but can also be experienced as a mirror that allows us to perform new subjectivities. That's what mirrors do: they give you the opportunity to perform not only what you "really" look like, but also what you desire. This insight about the slide from traumatic loss to creative performativity is something that Barbara Fischer explored in an exhibition titled *Love Gasoline*, which she curated at Mercer Union in 1996. She explicitly made that connection between wounds that become scars and scars that become style—performance.

It's fascinating to look around and consider the ways in which such obviously diverse utterances produced in this city over a long time—artistic utterances, curatorial utterances, also literary utterances—generate allegorical resonances. I find a surprising degree of continuity in the cultural manifestations that take place here, in Toronto. Like what you discovered by looking at the Art Metropole building, things suddenly appear that otherwise might not have appeared to vision, let alone to the imagination.

PK: These commonalities that you're uncovering as you go, and their continuity with each other, what do you think that represents?

LJ: A desire... It's said that necessity is the mother of invention, so I guess these commonalities are born from necessity. Need requires that something be elaborated or fabricated. Artists in Toronto offer an insight upon the fabricatedness of such things.

At some level, of course, it is a universal constant that people have needs and that they fabricate what they need in order to satisfy those needs. But I imagine that in strongly nationalistic places (like the US or Mexico, for example) these constructions of identity are not experienced as constructions; rather, they are experienced as "real" identities. Toronto's culture is remarkably suspicious of such identity formations. This suspicion has traditionally been interpreted as the city's lack of a sense of self. I think this misses the point.

The insight in this city lies on the recognition of the artificiality of these constructs, on the idea that these constructs are understood as "constructs," as performance, even as cross-dressing: identity is a form of drag, which produces an unusual definition of "authority." Along these lines, I think of Margaret Atwood's poem, "The Double Voice," which is, in essence, one author's act of ventriloquism performed through another author's (Susanna Moodie's) writings.

Similarly, in Wanda Nanibush's *Toronto: Tributes + Tributaries, 1971-1989* exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario, there is a videotape of a lip-sync performance by The Clichettes. This is an example of meta-performance—a performance of the clichés performed in daily life—performativity suffusing every level without a “real” core. These are the kinds of things that artists in Toronto have been insisting on for a long time. Look back thirty, forty, fifty years and you'll find such instances in the culture of the city: the idea that the desires I speak of are answered through the construction of something that must remain a construction; the idea that we mustn't be so convinced of these identity formations to the point that we'd lose sight of the desires from which they emerged. ■

Luis Jacob is a Peruvian-born, Toronto-based artist and curator. He studied semiotics and philosophy at the University of Toronto. Since his participation as an exhibiting artist in Documenta12 in 2007, he has achieved an international reputation, with exhibitions at La Biennale de Montréal (2016); Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York (2015); Centro Párraga, Murcia (2013); Witte de With, Rotterdam, and Taipei Biennial (2012); Museum of Canadian Contemporary Art, Toronto, and Generali Foundation, Vienna (2011); Kunsthalle Bern, and Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (2010); Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, and Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (2009). His curatorial work includes *Form Follows Fiction: Art and Artists in Toronto* (2016) at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto. In 2015, he co-curated the conference “This is Paradise: Art and Artists in Toronto” with Barbara Fischer in collaboration with Kitty Scott.

Parker Kay is a multi-disciplinary artist and writer currently working in Toronto, Canada. Kay’s practice investigates the systems and structures that operate within art, architecture, and communication theory. Much of Kay’s work looks at the rise of Network Culture and how the proliferation of digital communication has permeated our lives and marked our landscapes. Key to Kay’s practice is community engagement. Artist talks, lectures, and events offer Kay an opportunity to present research in progress in order to gather additional perspectives that can be funneled back into the project. Kay’s recent publications include “The Cube Has Six Sides” (2016) and “100 Ears: Celebrating 100 years of Dada” (2017) in collaboration with Ed Slopek. In 2017 Kay also founded “The Centre for Experimental Research” (c-e-r.org), an open education and research organization focused on investigating the relationship between the Canadian landscapes and man-made architecture.

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