



Continuous City: The Impossibility of Understanding in the Path of a Torontonian

Like many major urban centres, a percentage of the revenue generated through tourism in Toronto comes from the sale of postcards. Aside from banal Canadiana, the photographs on these cards are relatively specific and feature a range of views of the downtown skyline that are anchored by the familiar profiles of the CN Tower and the more prominent office towers of the financial district. To suggest that these views are somehow representative of the essence of Toronto is of course absurd and these types of simplistic “tourist” images can obviously never capture the complexity of the city – they merely distill it down to a dumb gestalt. If we want to move beyond clichéd scenes of the city, what kind of image would do Toronto (or any city, for that matter) justice? Furthermore, if banal touristic photography shows the city through the eyes of a visitor, how would an inhabitant go about authentically documenting the spatial specificities of their relationship with Toronto? Tori Foster’s *The Impossibility of Understanding in the Path of a Torontonian* proposes an ambitious prototype to address both of these questions.

The Impossibility of Understanding is a motion-based system of urban representation that uses the routes of three individuals to create personal views of the Toronto streetscape. These paths operate much like the cross section in architectural drawing but instead of delineating the interiority of an edifice they illustrate the experience of moving through the city, in all of its ephemeral glory. Foster has developed a custom camera rig and a corresponding software workflow to stitch together thousands of photographs of the street as collected by a pedestrian, a cyclist and the driver of an automobile. *The Impossibility of Understanding* does not capture the urban landscape as it extends into the horizon, it instead flattens the city by recording the view we would see while moving forward with our necks craned at a 90 degree angle (mainly capturing sidewalks and building façades). This system allows individuals to move through the city as dictated by their own preferences and itineraries to document their paths through sequential photographs. The multitude of resulting photographs are composited together into a dramatic widescreen-format image that re-presents these routes as an abstracted, side-scrolling video. When installed, *The Impossibility of Understanding* stacks these three videos vertically so that the viewer is provided the opportunity to survey and compare the various trips. As a benchmark, Foster has added an additional video that offers an approximation of driving from one side of the city to the other. This notion of “reference” is further reinforced by scales denoting (relational) metrics for space and time that are engraved in the aluminium display case that houses the video. The image capture, the compositing, the video array and the display unit are combined as an assemblage of representational techniques – a one-off example of metamedia constructed from “a large set of small building blocks.”¹



Detail of a still taken from the video component of *The Impossibility of Understanding in the Path of a Torontonian*.

In refining the above workflow, Foster has positioned herself as an urban curator – a collector of paths, routes and navigational idiosyncrasies. Rather than author a personal impression of the city she has devised a means of re-encoding the movement of others. By handing the reins over to three (ultimately) anonymous individuals – each with their own agenda and mode of transportation – Foster removes herself from the equation. It is precisely this absence that is one of the most compelling qualities of *The Impossibility of Understanding*, as rather than build a world around the “essential egotism”² of an individual flâneur, the project instead foregrounds the homogeneous nature of the city as experienced on a moment-to-moment basis. The manner in which this work functions as a timepiece is also crucial and there are a few quirks generated by Foster’s compositing system that are worth noting. First, the system captures the start-stop tempo of the city – a densely packed sidewalk, a pause at a stoplight or a rush hour traffic jam will result in a succession of near-identical frames, an exaggerated “smudging” of the view. Secondly, since roadways through the city are generally orthogonal, the act of turning yields a wonderful interruption in the pacing of the video. These “brilliant corners” and the arrhythmic pulse of the ever-advancing streetscape are indicative of a new graphic language for representing the city, one that reads more like a musical score than a travel diary and one that is completely capable of rendering the elasticity of time. When all the videos are watched in unison, *The Impossibility of Understanding* functions as a phase piece, whereby the four “movements” drift in and out of sync and the viewer has no choice but to let the accumulation of built form, sky and citizenry wash over them.

In terms of broader visual culture, what precedents might we invoke to consider this work? Given that the project tracks movement across space, GPS drawing immediately springs to mind, but this practice is too invested in a top-down conception of landscape to be a useful reference. Foster cites the remote monitoring and experimental photography of David Rokeby and Michael Awad as important influences and the technical virtuosity of both these practitioners is definitely visible in her work. Perhaps the most obvious contemporary undertaking that can be used to read *The Impossibility of Understanding* is the ubiquitous, stitched-together, panoramic images of Google Street View. Both Google Street View and Foster's project suggest the possibility of a "totalized" image of the city, one that is explicitly tied to route. However, as a commercial endeavour, Google (understandably) limits their abstraction to the blurring of "vehicles, faces and license plates"³ whereas *The Impossibility of Understanding* pushes the logic of the mega-composite to its breaking point. At this threshold, perspective distorts, architecture and the passage of time are defamiliarized and the goal is not so much navigation but losing oneself. Foster's project holds true to its namesake and her territory of investigation extends far beyond the boundaries of the Greater Toronto Area to interrogate the essence of perception and the city itself. Given that *The Impossibility of Understanding* is the first in a series of examinations of urban space, one can only wonder how Foster will construct and deploy her next viewing apparatus.

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1. See Lev Manovich's discussion of metamedia regarding in relation to *Aspen Movie Map* (the 1978-79 ancestor of Google Street View) in *Software Takes Command*. Draft - dated Nov. 20, 2008. Pg. 83.
2. See James V. Werner's summary of Priscilla Park Ferguson's research in *American flaneur: the cosmic physiognomy of Edgar Allan Poe*. New York City: Routledge, 2004. Pg. 9.
3. Rafman, Jon. "The Nine Eyes of Google Street View" on *Art Fag City*. Aug. 12 2009. <http://www.artfagcity.com/2009/08/12/img-mgmt-the-nine-eyes-of-google-street-view/>