

Simulcast
By Iga Janik

Susan Dobson is well known for her photographic work, multiplicity of images often focused on ordinary landscape, suburban sprawl and inspired by commuter culture. Her extensive series of interiors, fronts of suburban homes, and strip malls are well understood and represented. The exhibition at RMG is a great installation of the latest in a collection of images that shape our everyday landscape in southern Ontario.

The exhibition presented at Cambridge Galleries delivers a new work from the artist, and this time, in video format. A lengthy and well planned project, this is a first moving image work for Dobson and while a slight departure in medium, it can be seen as her most photographic work to date.

Simulcast, a 20-minute video with narration is a very photographic work indeed. Shot with the kind of precision and attention to detail the artist is known for, the moving image is subtle and quiet. The video is a lengthy single-frame image captured through the windshield of a moving vehicle on paved and unpaved roads late at night. Illuminated only by the headlights of the car, and occasional vehicles passing, it is a long and monotonous video trip through ordinary landscape. Like much of Dobson's work, this could be anywhere.

In notes regarding the project Dobson explains the inspiration for the work drawn from a lecture by Anthony Bannon, Director of George Eastman House delivered in Mexico City in 2005. In his talk on the history of photography and its evolution into digital and time-based media Bannon linked the uncertainty of the future of the medium to the experience of driving late at night, with little but few feet illuminated ahead, and no knowledge of what's ahead.¹

While inspired but the mention of the image itself, much of Dobson's curiosity in *Simulcast* stems from a desire to articulate possible outcomes, and illustrate the relationships between analogue and digital technologies and their histories. Without a critique of either of the medium, Dobson presents us with a work that highlights the richness of each in a juxtaposition of digital, high definition video image with the analogue audio component sourced from a 1938 radio broadcast of "War of the Worlds".

Originally aired on Sunday, October 30, 1938, "War of the Worlds" is a dramatization of H.G. Wells' novel by Orson Welles in which the Martians invade planet Earth. Although it was presented as dramatization, and introduced as such, the public reaction was one of shock and fear that this in fact was a real event and aliens have landed. Believed unequivocally (veracity of radio broadcasts or print media information having never been questioned before) the public outcry resulted in hysteria, and fleeing of cities.²

The sound component of *Simulcast* is a carefully edited version of the original broadcast, available in full length online.³ Dobson's use of the recording maintains the breaking news,

¹ Susan Dobson. Email correspondence.

² website

³ Insert website

bulletins, and interviews by scientists and eyewitnesses to the event originally aired, along with interludes of musical entertainment.

So while we watch the road driven on in a kind of hypnotic motion, we are listening to an increasingly dramatic and chaotic broadcast of potential encounter with alien species from the past. This may have been sufficient to create a complex work in narrative based format, but Dobson complicates this relationship further by introducing a digital voice of a GPS system into the mix.

The computerized female voice gives periodic directions at intersections and crossroads in the footage we are watching jolting us back to the present. This is a layered experience of fiction versus reality, of digital versus analogue, and impossibility of knowing the future (what's ahead on the road) by listening to the past (an expectation that the information we're hearing will somehow show itself in the footage we're watching). As an audience we start to interpret distant lights in the video as possible UFO sightings. There is a psychological effect that builds excitement and anticipation in us, which suspends us into a new kind of dimension riddled with anxiety. As the broadcast storyline increases in intensity and possible distance to the scene of the event diminishes, watching the moving road we start to search for the scene ourselves, feeling like witnesses to an epic moment in time. And then the GPS jolts us back again.

Without giving away the climax of the piece, and there is one, Dobson accomplishes several important things in one simple work. She creates a physical space for us to enter and participate, even if it is an illusion; articulates complexities of trust in any particular medium, current, future, or obsolete; and reminds us that information is subjective and our future unknown. While the image, even though time-based, engrains itself very much as a photograph, the audio is where the artist becomes a filmmaker. It is the audio component that keeps time, and us, on track as to what we are witnessing, even if the image gives us nothing. Or more importantly, prevents us from seeing something.

The only other artwork included in this exhibition is a light box image of a single illuminated telephone booth, standing on the side of some empty road, and also shot at night. *Transmission* has been exhibited before and is one of Dobson's most popular images. In this case it has been printed quite large, and in the context of the video piece takes on a very new role. It sits pregnant with anticipation, and exists in a void. It references the panic of 1938 and thousands of calls to radio and police stations from concerned citizens. It offers us, the viewers, a possibility of some fictional help or escape. Or is it too late already? Has the world ended? Is there no one left to use the phone to call for help? It's a thoughtful and articulate inclusion in an otherwise sparse exhibition that's layered with questions. The conversation between the two pieces is perpetual. No matter how much of the video we absorb, or at which point we begin to look at the photograph, both works shift accordingly. Moving us once again back into the past, or the future, depending on our own readings.

In discussing the work, and framing the two coinciding exhibitions presented in this publication, much thought has gone into trying to capture coherency between the respective shows and the bodies of work which have been included. *Simulcast* may seem like a bold departure from the photographic works by Dobson, but that is hardly the case. For one, it maintains a very strong relationship to Dislocation series. Dobson is a master manipulator of images. She makes us

question realities presented to us and tricks us at times into believing the impossible. Dislocation series plays heavily with our trust in photography. Very small moments of the improbable have been injected into the works. And although these are not presented in either of the exhibitions, Simulcast is a natural departure from those particular images, articulating perhaps most successfully “the anxious nature of this digital and analogue dichotomy”⁴.

But here exists a very strong relationship to suburbia as well. In current discussions about the future of land, use of public space, densification mandates for Ontario communities, and the nature of housing in light of growing aging population the future of suburbia is uncertain. The doom experienced by the listeners in 1938 may be the same as this uncertainty towards the future of our cities. While the headlights may point to the unknown future in the world of photography, the same applies to the unknown of what will become of the endless house facades Dobson has created in her *No Fixed Address* series. What will these homes look like in 2030? Or 2050? Will the phone booth exist at all? Will quarters?

Our jolt to the past can be seen as our future. The fleeting population from cities in 1938 in fear of alien encounter, and the possibility of unknown, is not at all dissimilar to the climate of abandoned communities that already exist, a trend that is continuing and will likely affect majority of western landscape in the decline of cities, and suburbs in particular. Mass exodus of Detroit for example, and the subsequent decade of its rapid decline, is already showing us the cities need to be rethought; that the alienation of under populated rural areas from other communities creates desolate margins in our society; and that while the desire for detached housing isn't dwindling, the future of suburbia may well see a very alien and empty Oakville, or Mississauga.

It's as if the “War of the Worlds”, in the way Dobson has used it, could easily be read as an announcement of the end of our world; the end of the road of how we've been living. Images of which are presented in (RMG title) while their future projected in *Transmission* at CG. It's a fantastical link between two exhibitions, and perhaps a gloom one, but the level of anxiety and fear of this idea is palpable throughout Dobson's artistic practice.

Researching, unrelated to this exhibition, alternative and activist practices of art collectives I came across the work of Department of Unusual Certainties, a Toronto-based research and design collective working at the interstices of urban design, planning, public art, spatial research and mapping. Their hypothetical video projects speak to these issues in fictional histories of suburbs, suggesting as much with drastic imagery with alien-like quality.⁵ The last single family house being built where no one lives arrives in 2019.

However, Dobson makes no specific judgments or projections. In her recent interview with Robert Enright, printed in *Border Crossings* (and reprinted in part for this publication), she speaks on the subject of her interior works. She articulates that while her photographs document diversity of homes, and lifestyles, she makes no critique on how people live.⁶ While non

⁴ Susan's notes

⁵ website

⁶ interview

judgmental as to the individual choices we all make, her evident distaste for strip malls and domestic American Dream shows clearly in her other works.

In both cases her approach is from a distance and rooted in observation. In that sense, Dobson is a historian and an archivist of our car obsessed commuter culture. With *Simulcast*, she is also a narrator of its possible outcomes without personal judgment, or speculation. How we interpret the final directions of the GPS system is up to us. The fact we are relying on it by the end of the video only reinforces Dobson's ideas on the improbable veracity of all or any information presented but our deep rooted desire to trust it on some level, however illogical it may seem.