

# The Video Art of Richard Carlyon: A Conversation

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When one wears earphones or iphones, one shuts out the visual or auditory world and replaces it with a representation. This leaves one part of the sensorial body in the corporal world and the other part in the virtual world. Richard Carlyon, from his six-part video, *A Saying of Sorts*

Carlyon is the most ontological of artists. His videos are one long meditation on the metaphysics of being. Of being here. Now. Not in the “be here now” of New Age-ism, but in the “what does it mean to be here now” in an age of the corporal (we can’t escape our bodies) and the virtual (are we being subsumed, the work seems to ask over and over again, by the virtual?). In the above-quoted video, Carlyon reads the same text on six different screens. Five screens show different versions of him, and in one there is simply a serenely contemplated wall that becomes an abstract painting of sorts. It could be one of his paintings, in fact: a black band, some stripes, then a white expanse. In the other five channels, his voice echoes eerily from video monitors, or just from the background, and sometimes from both; but in the video where his image is absent, his voice is, significantly, clear as a bell. We can hear him because we are not being assaulted or distracted by the virtual world (those videos of the artist). The only other sounds are the gentle, almost lulling sounds of traffic. It is a moment of serene contemplation. Carlyon’s work is rife with such moments, both the serene and the less-than-serene, and sometimes even the antic.

To move dust is an adventure. Richard Carlyon quoting Marcel Duchamp in *A Saying of Sorts*

One can’t help but think of Carlyon’s great dust drawings — drawings he made by simply leaving paper lying around his studio and then tracing whatever collected after a few weeks. They are beautiful, at once microcosmic and macrocosmic. A similar effect occurs in the punning *Rock Video*. A video for three monitors, it simply records the artist rolling various rocks, about the size of his fist, across a scuffed wooden floor. (The settings for Carlyon’s videos are always homely: paint-splattered, wooden beams exposed, wires hanging loose.) Sometimes he uses the jagged editing he likes to employ in almost all of his videos to create little rhythms, but usually he is simply content to let the rocks roll and record their movement. Sometimes they come to an abrupt halt; sometimes they wobble to a stop. You begin to notice

little things like that in Carlyon’s videos, and he wants you to notice them. He wants you to begin to discover the profound in the mundane. Humans and their rocks: skipping them across ponds, building their edifices, stoning one another to death.

Today each person lives his or her life as unannounced performance. Richard Carlyon, *A Saying of Sorts*

In the video *Their Then Now*, Carlyon re-edits a Fred Astaire and Rita Hayward dance number so that movement is reiterated, re-examined. The initial joyful artificiality of the original becomes, if not more joyful, then differently joyful. Carlyon always wants us to see again, or to see anew, or to see askew. For him, as often as not, art is not about discovery but about rediscovery.

Imaginary acts are not unreal. Richard Carlyon, *A Saying of Sorts*

Again, think Fred and Rita. Wholly imaginary characters bursting into song and dance at the drop of a top hat. And yet not unreal. Imaginary acts become part of the texture of memory and therefore of reality, or at least of our reality as we continue to make up our lives. This is seen most clearly, I think, in *A Rolling of Flows*, a series of dissolves that Carlyon edited together from mostly black-and-white melodramas. Breathtaking in and of itself, one moment dissolves into another, creating the paradoxical feeling of the endlessness and terrible finiteness that memory holds for us. For Carlyon, time is almost always both element and subject.

The same thing seen twice but in different resolutions allows its viewer to see it twice in different ways. Richard Carlyon, *A Saying of Sorts*

In *Floor Show*, a video for five monitors, Carlyon alternates an image of himself walking barefoot in cuffed jeans across a floor with rocks being rolled across the same floor. The images on all five screens appear to be identical; but the more you watch, the more the image changes. The floor becomes an abstract canvas. The subtle gradations in the light become subtle gradations of color because of the editing. At times, the bare feet begin to seem unbearably fragile and human. The artist’s shadow as he walks back and forth and around the floor — not pointlessly, but without



narrative intent — reminds me of another quotation from his *A Saying of Sorts* about how forms in darkness do not cast a shadow. This inevitably leads me to contemplate mortality and, finally, Plato's Cave, where the poor men mistook the shadows on the wall for reality. But you will supply your own meanings for the shadow that Carlyon deliberately renders in this work.

*To observe something is to alter it. Richard Carlyon, A Saying of Sorts*

The blue image of a naked young man swimming across a pool to a chorus of frogs appears in *Seen Unsaid*. Here, Carlyon uses the same repetitive editing to create little rhythms and, on its own, this image is romantic and erotic. But when the young man emerges from the pool, we see instead a realistically colored image of his bare wet feet walking across the concrete. What was previously dreamy becomes less ideal — more like feet of clay, as it were. By observing and connecting these images, Carlyon alters them.

*Any activity that releases art from the burden of its exclusive history in order to discover it everywhere is worthy of serious attention. Richard Carlyon quoting Kenzo Okado in A Saying of Sorts*

The activity depicted in *Nomad's Crossing*, a video for six monitors, is of Carlyon moving himself with his feet while seated in a battered and splattered chair, across an equally scuffed and paint-splattered floor. He moves in little arcs; he moves forward; he moves backwards. Apparently, this task is not easy because the artist struggles with it, sometimes mightily. The more one watches, the more Sisyphean it becomes. This simple and unknowable activity takes on the quality of myth or metaphor. The protagonist (we do not actually see Carlyon's face; he is shot from about the waist down) becomes a sort of Everyman in his brown shoes, jeans and white shirt — clothes, in other words, of the most banal kind. His activity, isolated and thoroughly gazed upon, begins to take on a resonance that at times becomes almost painful to watch and to hear. Carlyon is acutely aware of



sound in his work, and he does not spare us the abrasive scraping of that chair across the floor. It becomes the fingernails of life across the cosmos of a blackboard.

In the world of print, children were seen and not heard but, on the internet, children are heard and not seen. Richard Carlyon, *A Saying of Sorts*

This question is everywhere in Carlyon's work: Who are we immutably? Who is technology turning us into?

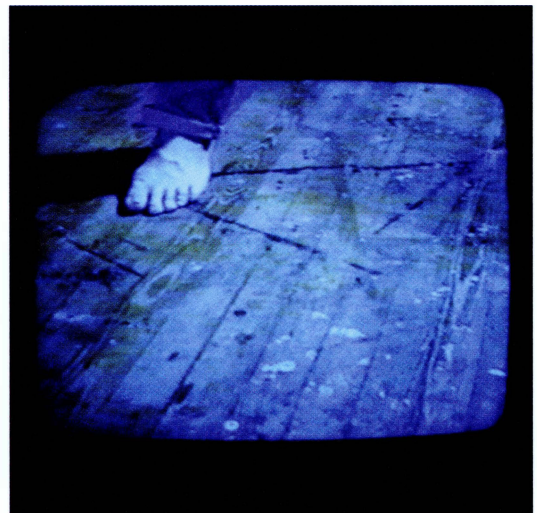
The phrase 'I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it' really should be 'if I hadn't believed it with all my heart, I wouldn't have seen it.' Richard Carlyon, *A Saying of Sorts*

In the center monitor of the extraordinary three-part *Pacer's Song*, the artist appears formally dressed in a black suit and informally undressed in bare feet, a recurring motif that often seems to symbolize, or embody, the fragile human body and its flawed beauty. He slaps (those sounds again) up and down another one of his bare-bones interiors, this time a hall. He sits in a chair, gets up again, paces, drags the chair through an open door. Then from a different angle: he drags the chair down the hall, drags it back, sits again, paces, drags the chair off-screen, pushes/slides the chair down the hall,

drags the chair down some steps with it awkwardly thumping behind him. He finally stops and, apparently having given up on the chair, simply walks up and down the stairs. Though we never see his face, the uncertainty and anxiety of this pacer are palpable. Meanwhile, the videos on the left and the right contain images from movies jaggedly edited in Carlyon's favorite style. They repeat motions at irregular intervals, sometimes creating what look like little skips, and sometimes creating longer motions: a woman or a man running up stairs, doors opening and closing to we know not what, together with the image of a key and the phrase, "took me just half an hour to find it" — all hypnotically repeated and filled with dread, sometimes faintly (who is behind that door?) and sometimes startlingly (men falling violently downstairs). The pacer in the center video has plenty to be pacing about. We don't know what's going to happen when we get to the top of that staircase, or who is behind that door, or when we're going to tumble down that staircase to our own death.

Anyone can name anything. Richard Carlyon, *A Saying of Sorts*

I'm not sure that Carlyon names, but I certainly think he renames; and I think he is passionately involved in the task of allowing the viewer the fearful pleasure of naming or renaming.



An error: failure to adjust from a preconception to an actuality. Richard Carlyon, *A Saying of Sorts*

I believe Carlyon's work is saturated in this idea. In *Difficulty and Desire*, he sits in shadow, in front of a window, a still fan resting in the window, the sign of some building behind him. The colors are red, white, and blue. He intones, almost inaudibly, "She was a visitor," over and over again, moving his head slowly from left to right. (This line comes from composer Robert Ashley's opera, *That Morning Thing*.) Then the image changes: the fan is now running, and you can clearly see that the sign behind him says UNIFORMS. There's also another sound, like a beast lowing. Then someone else seems to be saying, "She was a visitor." Carlyon reappears, eerily lit; holding the mask of a black and bearded man to his face, which he then removes to reveal another mask, plastic and opaque, covering his own face. The piece is clearly about identity, about the transient or elusive or unknowable nature of identity. But it is also clearly about a perceptual shift from the preconception that we can know ourselves to the actuality that this is impossible, that identity is always flexible, that perhaps we should even consider another identity all together.

Making something real by rendering it is not the same as making it recognizable. Richard Carlyon, *A Saying of Sorts*

Carlyon was undoubtedly interested in what was real. But real did not mean recognizable. It meant repeating an image or an action until it became unrecognizable, until it became invested with new meaning — perhaps more authentic meaning. For all of his variety, experimentation, curiosity, and endless reinvention, he strikes me in a way as a very old-fashioned artist. Images in art have never meant to be read realistically; they are meant to be read mythically, symbolically, or metaphysically. Rotting fruit in seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painting is never rotting fruit; it is death. Images are meant to be explored and discovered. Richard Carlyon understood to the core of his artistic being that exploration and discovery are an essential part of the pleasure of art. I would venture to say that in *A Saying of Sorts* and *Pacer's Song*, among other video works, he conveys this understanding with real greatness. But I will let him have the last word in our conversation because he should. Talking with Dick always made me excited about the possibilities of being alive. These videos do, too. If he hadn't believed it with his whole heart, they remind us, then he wouldn't have seen it.

Hassidic Jews believe that every object in the world has divine sparks trapped within it. Mind you, this includes roofing nails and peanut butter. The ordinary is not ordinary. The obvious is not obvious. Richard Carlyon, *A Saying of Sorts*

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Richard Carlyon's studio, 723 West Broad Street, Spring 2006.



