YOU SEE I AM HERE AFTER ALL

ZOE LEONARD

Dia Art Foundation, New York

Distributed by Yale University Press,
New Haven and London

2010
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UNSETTLING TIME AT THE FALLS

Lytle Shaw
I remember as a kid how excited I was to learn the word anachronism. I thought it amazing that an object could be out of its own time—that it could actually carry another time with it.

—Zoe Leonard

It is hard to turn away from moving water.

—Lyn Hejinian

In 1804, Alexander Wilson set off from Philadelphia with two friends, Duncan and Leech, on a journey to Niagara Falls. During their long days on foot, in which they were often "begulfed in mire," they encountered raging forest fires, cougars, wolves, and nine-foot rattlesnakes on their path before turning in to sleep, often in the cabin of a forlorn woodsman who would invariably trot out each of his best animal skins and antler specimens, talking the travelers' ears off about the occasions of their capture before "our nodding heads the power of sleep confess, / And the kind hunter led us to our rest"—as Wilson put it in his epic poem of the journey, *The Forsters: A Poem, Descriptive of a Pedestrian Journey to the Falls of Niagara, in the Autumn of 1804.*¹ Having survived endless hunting stories as well as numberless encounters with wild animals, trekked off-road through the woods and swamps of Pennsylvania and across the Finger Lakes of upstate New York, finally to the Oswego River, the party then floated down twenty-three miles to Lake Ontario, where they were shortly overcome by a tempest and, luckily, hauled aboard a larger boat. "The wrecked vessel staggered," as one of Wilson's biographers tells us, "slow-rising on huge, white-crested waves, and plunging headlong again. Darkness fell, and the fury of the storm increased. The travelers lay groaning, seasick and terrified, in the cabin."² Soaked, vomit stained, dizzy, and nauseous, both sunburned and frozen, feet and joints poking through their ripped clothing, the travelers eventually reached solid ground at the Niagara River's outlet into Lake Ontario, about five miles below the falls, where they listened expectantly for its roar:

with throbbing hearts to hear
The long-expected cataract meet the ear;
But list in vain. Though five short miles ahead,
All sound was hushed and every whisper dead. (p. 73)

It had been a long trip, and this last dashed expectation, after the harrowing lake voyage, made some of the members testy. Duncan, for instance, began to fear that after all the hype, after all the literary descriptions that had sent them on their way, the falls would turn out to be just some domestic mill dam, completely unworthy of their Natty Bumppoisms.³ Overcome by this suspicion, he exploded
in rhyming couplets, imploring his mates to beat him soundly if he ever trusted a travel writer again:

Here, three long weeks by storms and famine beat,
With sore bruised backs, and lame and blistered feet,
Here, nameless hardships, griefs and miseries past,
We find some mill-dam for our pains at last.
Once safe at home, kicked, cudgelled let me be
If e'er bookmaker makes a fool of me (pp. 73–74)

As they drew nearer, though, the actual sound of the falls rekindled an even stronger expectation: “Awe-struck sensations now all speech represt, / And expectation throbbed in every breast” (p. 75). Nor, in this new state of proximate awe, were all their risks behind them: when they finally reached a rickety ladder at the “verge” of the “dread abyss” and “down its slight slippery bars” descended, the ladder pulled away from the wall (before eventually catching and holding), affording the travelers a sudden foreshadowing of their own “mangled limbs, and blood, and spattered brains” (p. 77). All this no doubt contributed to their emotional response to the falls, where there was a lot of mute pointing and gasping.

Beyond its base, there like a wall of foam,
Here in a circling gulf unbroken thrown,
With uproar hideous, first the Falls appear,
The stunning tumult thundering on the ear.
Above, below, where'er the astonished eye
Turns to behold, new opening wonders lie,
Till to a steep's high brow unconscious brought,
Lost to all other care of sense or thought,
There the broad river, like a lake outspread,
The islands, rapids, falls, in grandeur dread,
The heaps of boiling foam, th' ascending spray,
The gulf profound, where dazzling rainbows play,
This great, o'erwhelming work of awful Time,
In all its dread magnificence sublime,
Rose on our view, amid a crashing roar
That bade us kneel, and Time's great God adore (p. 75)

Deictic gestures strain out of the passage—there, here, there, this—choreographed only partly by spatial organizers like above and below. Instead, within this disorderly, multisensory bonanza, Wilson claims that our eyes are eventually guided to a specific location—the “steep's high brow”—only to be “lost to all other care of sense or thought.” And what one thinks of, when effectively transported
by the falls beyond familiar sensation and cognition, is time. Certainly time appears to Wilson as the central meaning of the amazing spectacle: it both forms the larger monument, at a geological clip, and organizes the second-to-second experience of flux as water rushes over the cataract. And this is striking, in fact, for its displacement of divine authorship. (They take a knee for “Time’s great God,” not for God.) But time—now understood more specifically as the experience of simple duration, repeated hardship, and consequent anticipation during the obligatory three weeks of trudging, poling, sailing, and hiking—is also the condition that builds and shapes their ultimate sense of the falls—enabling their account of the cataract as a sublimely singular site.

By 1840, when Nathaniel Parker Willis published his *American Scenery*, with a large collection of etchings by W. H. Bartlett, the situation had changed. Because of the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, Niagara Falls could now join the Hudson Valley as an accessible, picturesque icon of the young country, and it is these two locations that begin the book and figure most prominently throughout. Instead of a risky prospect at the end of an uncertain land, river, and lake journey, the falls now appear as but one of many frictionless views on a barge or rail itinerary mapped out near the beginning of the book. More, for those bothered by the closeness of quarters on the canal barges, the copious prints of *American Scenery* were advertised to offer an exhaustive landscape tour that could be conducted mentally without leaving one’s fireside. As Willis writes in the preface:

To compare the sublime of the Western Continent with the sublime of Switzerland—the vales and rivers, lakes and waterfalls, of the New World with those of the Old—to note their differences, and admire or appreciate each by contrast with the other, was a privilege hitherto confined to the far-wandering traveler. In the class of works, of which this is a specimen, however, that enviable enjoyment is brought to the fire-side of the home-keeping and secluded as well; and, sitting by the social hearth, those whose lot is domestic and retired, can, with small cost, lay side by side upon the evening table the wild scenery of America, and the bold passes of the Alps—the leafy Susquehanna with its rude raft, and the palace-gemmed Bosphorus with its slender caique. So great a gratification is seldom enjoyed at so little cost and pains.

Rather than spending one summer sailing to Marseilles, proceeding by carriage across southern France into Switzerland, before ascending Mont Blanc,
and then the next trekking through the Susquehanna Valley and across New York State on foot and raft on the way to Niagara Falls, one could now hold two elegant calf-bound volumes of illustrated travel writing on one's lap while reclining on a favorite divan and comparing transatlantic landscapes over a snifter of brandy. Americans, according to Willis, could begin to have a European relation to their own natural monuments. Not surprisingly, this new relation—forged out of a larger transformation of distance, accessibility, and documentation—also began to affect how sites themselves were described. “The best way to approach Niagara is to come up on the American shore and cross at the ferry. The descent of about two hundred feet by the staircase, brings the traveler to the most imposing scene ... that he will ever have witnessed” (p. 7).

Willis’s is a world of known and comparable views, accessible by dependable ferries, barges, and safe staircases. When visiting the grotto behind the sheet at Horseshoe Falls—where Wilson is nearly catapulted into the current—Willis, by contrast, is led docilely by a “very civil Englishman, who, with the assistance of his daughter and two sons, keeps a reading-room and registry, vends curious walking sticks cut at Niagara, minerals, spars, and stuffed scorpions, besides officiating as guide under the Falls, and selling brandy and water” (p. 39). The ladies in the group are “taken into a small apartment to change their dresses preparatory to their descent,” before the guides’ costumes are compared to those of brigands from the Abruzzi and drowning victims in the Paris morgue. The behind-the-falls experience is administered, whereupon Willis concludes that “this undertaking is rather pleasanter to remember than to achieve” (p. 40).

If the “payoffs” of Willis’s views and strolls still involve temporality—as they did for Wilson—time is now fundamentally displaced. Anticipation and retrospect seem to overwhelm the thick present immersion that had been Wilson’s reward. The Forsters ends, abruptly, with the attainment of the view, emerging as a gradually earned payoff from the travel duration, hardships, and continual threats to safety that in effect made the narrative. For Willis, if Niagara may present some gold standard of sublime aesthetics, it does so by taking up its position immediately within a matrix of comparisons—the rest of the tour. It is the prize among a large class of commemorative visual specimens.
Elizabeth McKinsey, whose work on representations of Niagara Falls has been invaluable for this essay, sees this sentimental descent into stereotype as a pure loss: "The familiar vocabulary no longer seems connected to strong and genuine responses.... The old conviction is gone.... What were developed as vital and meaningful conventions for depicting the Falls, one's response to it, and its meaning have become for the later visitors empty clichés, conventionalized to the point of sentimentalization." And it is not hard to prefer Wilson's gritty and unpredictable poem to Willis's combed and blandly "cultured" narrative. Nor is it hard to prefer the later paintings of Thomas Cole or the prose writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, which seek to earn their immersive experience of the falls by wresting it away from the trivialization that threatened to nullify the place once it became, in effect, a stop on the nineteenth century's version of the monorail.

And yet we may not want to pass over these fallen falls too quickly. For it is this shift from discovered to administered sublimity that is at the heart of Zoe Leonard's project *You see I am here after all* (2008), an enormous compilation of Niagara Falls postcards hung along several coplanar walls at Dia:Beacon and arranged according to their perspective—here Table Rock from below in a grid of seventy-two, there Horseshoe Falls from above in a rectangle of fifty-six. These clusters stretch and shift according both to which of the famed subsites is being examined and to the exact angle of our vantage on it: we look up at images in which the perspective of the postcard guides us upward or across or down when the cards bid us to do so. The result of all this is that our movement through the installation is a kind of tour; of both the falls and the ways, and technologies, of seeing them. Printing modes vary across the span of the collection—some cards have the deep colors of 1970s photography, others the familiar arty blur of turn-of-the-century tinted photographs. Many of the postcards are stamped, indicating their traffic through the mail, and some—those in which the front image has been cropped and a blank space left around it—have messages scrawled on the front. Generally these tend to comment on the writer's travel itinerary or on missing the addressee, and not on the falls.

And this seems continuous with Leonard's larger itinerary: what we see in this installation is not the falls per se, but a history of seeing, or rather excerpting, the falls—and sending these excerpts as a form of social exchange. "You see" not what I successfully took in, or even what I partially captured but whose vastness and power necessarily exceed representation. No, what you "see" (both the title and the installation suggest) is that I was here, that I have come back with proof of having been here. You see the traffic in sublimity, dainty and contained at the scale of each individual card—now grown vast, overwhelming, and immersive through the great powers of installation. The result, then, is an immense cascade of petite mementos, a sheer vertical wall of tinted visual trinkets, a sublime expanse of printed card-stock rectangles.
Perhaps the reader has sensed in that last paragraph the growing roar of an approaching critical reference? For we would now seem to be within a short hike of Walter Benjamin’s monumental essay on the subject, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” But we will not advance. For as sublime as Benjamin’s essay is, it has alas become the Niagara Falls of modernist criticism: the postcard most commonly wrested from its author’s majestic site, nestled as authenticating stamp in any number of bland essays to magically incant a critical power that, removed from the aura of its moment and specific argument, no longer works its office. Those who now cite this work run the risk of appearing as the Nathaniel Parker Willises of criticism—packed on their critical tour boats and sent nodding pliantly at the established monuments. The Alexander Wilsons will need to wander within The Arcades Project. And if these arcades, too, would seem to be undergoing critical gentrification, still there is more of a possibility of operating as an Atget among their less charted passages.

Which brings me back to Zoe Leonard, who is perhaps best known for her vast archive of photos Analogue (1998–2009), which seems to map the last vestiges of a mechanical age—manifest in single-bay stores with one-of-a-kind signs hung above roll-up doors and in the heterogeneous products and services displayed and advertised by these noncorporate, nonchain, predominantly New York establishments: shoe and TV repair, Stetson hats, bolts of fabric, or hulking piles of bulk clothing. In all these objects, signs, and “anachronistic” styles of display, we see not just vividly concrete (properly Benjaminian) evidence of New York’s economic and cultural connection to other regions and countries, not just a series of implied paths and itineraries that concretely bind New York to points around the world, but also the nested residue of what appear to be distant times or what we might call minor temporalities. They are minor because they in fact do exist in the present, despite that present’s (largely successful) attempt to make us understand them as anachronistic—as mechanical fossils in the age of the digital. Their minor status points to a quiet war of temporality that goes on continually as objects and styles of visuality, as circulation paths and methods of fabrication, vie for access to, and authority over, the look of any present.

For You see I am here after all, Leonard seems to have set forth from the store windows of her native New York City to explore some of the paths and temporalities latent in Analogue. But, given the commission by Dia for a site in the middle of the Hudson River Valley, famously depicted by the New York artists of a century and a half ago, Leonard’s chosen objects are not shoes and matchboxes, not fabric and Stetson hats, but landscapes—those mythical ob-
jects that, first in the 1820s in the form of canvases, began to be shipped down
the Hudson or packed into carriages destined for the fledgling art market in
New York City.

And yet there is an initial displacement, within this consideration, from
the more picturesque Hudson River Valley to the more sublime Niagara Falls.
What links these two places, first, is that they were the two landscapes most
valued (and most depicted) in the nineteenth century; they seemed, that is, most
to embody the qualities of Americanness to which early landscape artists and
their audiences were attracted. But this embodiment depended, as it does in
all depictions of landscape, on the careful organization of the vistas' temporal
dimensions: in this case, the history of Native American conquest had to be
managed, the present had to be vivified, and a hope-inspiring future had to seem
immanent and inevitably linked to "progress." These, at least, were some of
the normative pressures to which artists responded in individual ways.

As many critics have noted, claims about a particularly American landscape
aesthetics have typically been associated both with scale and with ruggedness.
Willis, for instance, suggests that our "lavish and large-featured sublimity" may
be a result of nature having "wrought with a bolder hand in America." But he
also suggests, perhaps more surprisingly, that the novelty of the effect of Ameri-
can scenery may have to do with its not having been made into, and for hun-
dreds of years seen as, scenery—as the landscape of Europe was. He suggests
thereby a domesticating effect that operates not merely through physical inter-
ventions in the landscape but through conceptual interventions in one's learned
perception of it—above all, the kind of perception inherent in Europeans'
paintings and prints of their landscapes (and equally inherent, his later critics
would suggest, in his and Bartlett's depictions of Niagara Falls). Whatever the
fate of Willis's own depiction, the most important upshot of this transatlantic
difference, for Willis, is the diametrically opposite temporal implications a
viewer comes to associate with the European landscape, where "the soul and
centre of attraction in every picture is some ruin of the past." What is surpris-
ing, though, is just how Willis associates the American landscape with futurity.
Anticipation provides, rather than the possibility of a liberatory escape from the
cruel feudal past of Europe, an only partially satisfying daydream in the face of
what are, for him, otherwise frighteningly vacant prospects. "He who journeys
here, if he would not have the eternal succession of lovely natural objects—"Lie
like a load on the weary eye"—must feed his imagination on the future." The
best remedy for eye-fatiguing "historyless" landscape is, for Willis, calculation—especially that involving how infrastructural interventions, like those
of railroads and canals, will in turn affect population patterns and, ultimately,
speculative interventions in the market: "Instead of inquiring into its antiquity,
he sits over the fire with his paper and pencil, and calculates what the popula-
tion will be in ten years, how far they will spread, what the value of the neigh-
bouring lands will become, and whether the stock of some canal or railroad that
seems more visionary than Symmes’s expedition to the centre of the earth, will, in consequence, be a good investment” (p. 4).

Four hundred years ago, when Henry Hudson explored the river that would eventually take on his name, he was in search of the fabled Northwest Passage: the shortcut that would allow travel to Asia without sailing around the tip of South America, the Cape of Horn. Or rather, he was hired by the Dutch East India Company to seek the Northeast Passage (around the north of Russia), changed his mind midcourse, and then decided not to venture north of Canada but rather to follow John Smith’s suggestion that the passage to Asia lay through the center of the American continent, not around its periphery, a belief that Smith seems to have held as a result of imperfect communication with Native Americans who apparently thought that he was curious about the Great Lakes.21

Later historians have sensed an irony here in that Hudson was not particularly interested in what he did find—the island that would become Manhattan, the river that carried him past it, and the fertile and beautiful landscape flanking him on his trip up to what would become Albany, where, realizing that the river did not in fact slice entirely through the continent, he turned around. Throughout the trip, he seems to have been unmoved by the aesthetic possibilities of the highlands near Newburgh, of the views from what would become West Point and the Palisades, which would later find their way into American Scenery. Indeed, he considered his journey a failure.22 But there is perhaps a less remarked irony that did not fully occur until about the time that the river took on Hudson’s name in the mid-nineteenth century: that with the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, and with the enormous boom in trade with a series of newly produced trading centers, first across upstate New York and then around the Great Lakes, the Hudson River did become something very much like a Northwest Passage—a previously nonexistent trade route that put navigators into contact with an enormously profitable market. And it was this link to a new market—one that may well have eclipsed the amount of trade New York did with those countries it would have encountered at the end of the actual Northwest Passage—that assured Manhattan’s commercial supremacy over its rival East Coast cities, especially Philadelphia and Boston, and, to a large degree, cemented the condition of global connectedness around a central hub that Leonard analyzes in her Analogue photographs.
But why was a canal necessary? Why didn't one just sail into the Great Lakes from the Saint Lawrence River? The answer—second nature to all those who moved goods or people around the United States before the transportation revolution of the mid-nineteenth century but very possibly fuzzy to contemporaries—is Niagara Falls, which renders impossible boat passage from Lake Erie and all the inland Great Lakes to Lake Ontario, from which ocean access is possible. As Linnaeus's student the Swedish explorer Pehr Kalm explained: "In as much as one cannot row a boat from Lake Erie to Lake Ontario because of Niagara Falls, boats have to be carried over land ... nine English miles."

The result is that: "All the water thus collected in the four inland seas ... and in the numerous streams running into them makes its way first through a short, narrow sound, and then over Niagara's lofty falls, whereupon it forms a broad river ... and empties into Lake Ontario, and from there flows with the St. Lawrence River through the most thickly settled parts of Canada and to the ocean." It was the Erie Canal that circumvented the falls and linked Manhattan to these "inland seas."

Ultimately the same transportation system that domesticated the falls and gave rise to the condition that Leonard displays in *You see I am here after all* also carried the news of that domestication. That is, in addition to the wheat, barley, vegetables, whiskey, and planks that floated on the canal, elevating New York's economy and eventually helping to settle both upstate New York and the Great Lakes region, what also made its way along the canal was books. As Edwin G. Burroughs and Mike Wallace note: "What really assured New York of an unassailable lead in the book trade [in addition to its being a clearinghouse for European news] was cheap and easy access to western readers via the Erie Canal. Every fall, just before the onset of winter, and then again in the spring—a seasonal pattern that still rules the industry—city publishers dispatched crate after crate of books via the canal to retailers scattered across upstate New York, around the Great Lakes, and along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers."

Back then to Willis and Bartlett and the trip to Niagara Falls via canal around 1840. When they stopped at Lockport or Utica or Glen's Falls and admired the town or the lock long enough for Bartlett to make a drawing for *American Scenery*, they were not only marking out the picturesque journey between New York and Niagara Falls on the Erie Canal; they were also, in effect, tracing out the first stops on the path that their own book, and many others afterward, would take once New York came to dominate the publishing industry precisely through the canal, extending its market not just to these
tiny frontier towns but, of course, to the boom towns around the Great Lakes, including Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago. Their book thus presents in picturesque form small switching points and minor technological marvels along the market for picturesque description.

We can assume that many of the early specimens among Leonard’s postcards of the falls made a similar trip on barges. With their massive reunion at Dia, we are witness not merely to a kind of infinite fragmentation of the falls as it is reproduced into an irreconcilably heterogeneous number of views. We are also made to ponder—and this is central to the carefully muted and reheated sublimity offered by the piece—the dizzying number of trips that these images made, simultaneously as small functionaries of the American sublime and conveyors of mostly banal travel notes.

Certainly these are auralless multiples. And yet what Leonard is doing is not bemoaning, yet again, the shift that Benjamin articulated—not diagnosing a fallen condition of reproducibility and consequent aura loss 70 years after this became news as theory, and 170 since it made news as practice. The juxtaposition of different technological modes, the gridding of view over time, the title of the work (with its stress on the that of being there rather than the what such being there might mean)—all this suggests an interest in analyzing the circuits in which the image of the falls was distributed. Leonard thus frames also the world in which the falls trafficked, including that of the Erie Canal and the Hudson—the space between the “frontier” of Buffalo and the increasingly metropolitan center of New York. But this analysis coincides with, and enables, something else: the production of a new kind of immersive possibility in these failed talismans of the power of American landscape as they, themselves, now become a landscape inside Dia:Beacon—a second-order site-singularity out of the degraded raw materials of the circulated and fallen sublime. This immersive landscape of fallen representations of the falls is “anachronistic” in the sense that it is organized around a natural monument that overrepresentation has made invisible, in the way that clichés are invisible. It is anachronistic, too, in the sense that it includes views made (at a moment perhaps when the falls could still be “seen”) by what we inevitably understand now as outmoded technological processes. But it is anachronistic, perhaps most interestingly, because the installation as a whole charts another version of the kinds of implied itineraries that lurk inside each of the objects and signs in Leonard’s photographs of New York storefronts and their minor temporalities—here a nineteenth-century itinerary of traffic in the sublime and the picturesque that linked the Hudson to New York City, and both of these to Niagara Falls, first implicitly and analogically, later, after the Erie Canal and railways, literally and more directly.

In a superficial reading, this project’s “anachronism” might be taken as proof that Leonard’s Analogue is the more “contemporary” work—engaged as it is with the current fabric of New York urbanism. But Analogue’s actual engagement
with New York urbanism consists precisely in questioning how and why certain objects, and visual styles more generally, can come to seem "anachronistic" when they, too, occupy the present: a fate that has swallowed up perception of the still-falling Niagara Falls—accessible now and tomorrow and yet somehow over at the same time. This leads us to a final—richer and stranger—meaning of the title, You see I am here after all, in which the falls themselves might be imagined as the speaker, lamenting that they outlive in empirical fact their definitive death in perception, their banishment from the present.

Framed as such, this project can be understood as a complement to, rather than a departure from, Leonard's larger study of what I'm calling minor temporalities, in which she asks: who (or what) has the power to relegate these (in fact still largely available) views, and the affects associated with them, to a past from which we are securely separated? How do certain features of the present get primitivized as past? Ultimately what is at issue in these postcards is not merely the "documentation" of one epoch as it passes into another but rather the possible unsettling of claims toward contemporaneity.

NOTES

I would like to thank Jennifer Baker, Mike Kelly, Lynne Cooke, and Karen Kelly for their helpful responses to drafts of this essay.


3. The links between The Foresters and the works of James Fenimore Cooper are numerous: in fact, the first of Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales, which all feature the frontiersman Natty Bumppo as their protagonist, is titled The Pioneers; or, The Sources of the Susquehanna (1823); Cooper's fiction also prominently featured dramatic scenes at Niagara Falls.
4. As George Rogers Taylor writes: "By 1840 the people of the United States had constructed canals totaling 3,326 miles, a distance greater than that across the continent from New York to Seattle. All but approximately 100 miles had been built since 1816, mostly between 1824 and 1840. The total canal mileage, 1,277 in 1830, increased by over 2,000 miles in the decade following." (Taylor, The Transportation Revolution, 1815–1860 [New York: Rinehart & Co., 1951], p. 52.)
5. Both Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope complain of the close quarters on canal travel. For an overview of responses to the canal, see The Erie Canal Reader, ed. Roger W. Hecht (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

7. Other views, like that of the outlet of the Niagara River (where Wilson and his party had disembarked) are glossed blandly as presenting an “unusually bold character” whose components are avoided in favor of a history of the various forts at the site.


9. McKinsey suggests a direct link between the two inasmuch as she takes Wilson’s engraving A View of the Great Pitch Taken from Below (1804), which introduced the view from below, as a significant influence on Bartlett: “The success of Wilson’s monumental strategy is underlined by its countless imitators in the next three decades” (ibid., p. 80), among whom she numbers Willis’s collaborator, Bartlett. “By the 1830s, monumental views of Niagara had multiplied to the point of cliché, but that very fact attests to the effectiveness of the monumentalizing strategy in depicting the cataract’s awesome power.” (Ibid.)

10. For a good account of this attempt, see part 4—“The Recovery of the Sublime at Niagara”—of McKinsey, Niagara Falls, pp. 189–247.

11. One is tempted, given this essay’s tragic fate, to retitile it “The Work of Criticism in the Age of Mechanical Citation.”

12. Benjamin’s other most widely sent critical postcard comes from the same essay: the argument that man’s “self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic.” (Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Illuminations: Essays and Reflections, trans. Harry Zohn [New York: Schocken, 1968], p. 242.) This claim has given rise to the mystification—against the rest of Benjamin’s work, and arguably against the meaning even of the quoted passage—that the authentically political operates in a domain that somehow escapes, and indeed actively guards against, all vestiges of formal organization, all arrangements of the sensible, that might be called “aesthetic.” Recently, Jacques Rancière has taken up this claim directly: “There is... an ‘aesthetics’ at the core of politics that has nothing to do with Benjamin’s discussion of the ‘aestheticization of politics’ specific to ‘the age of the masses.’ This aesthetics should not be understood as the perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art, by a consideration of the people qua work of art... [Aesthetics instead is] a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time.” (Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics, trans. Gabriel Rockhill [New York: Continuum, 2004], p. 13.)


14. This project is documented in a catalogue of an exhibition held at the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University, Zoe Leonard: Analogue (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

15. Leonard says of this: “There is something more here than quaintness, or nostalgia. It is a feeling of connectedness to the rest of the world: to language and economy, to history and struggle—to the endless supply of human solutions to the problem of survival... I began to see that the urban language I’d been trying to record, this history of my own city, held the key to what I’d been wanting to record globally. I began to see New York as a kind of fulcrum or hub. All these goods and languages and money pass through here.” (Leonard, “Out of Time,” October 100 [Spring 2002], pp. 91, 93.)
16. There were artists who had success while refusing this program, as in the case of Thomas Cole. But his position was certainly not the dominant one. For rich accounts of Cole and of nineteenth-century American landscape painting more generally, see Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825–1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), and Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

17. The full passage reads: “Either Nature has wrought with a holier hand in America, or the effect of long continued cultivation on scenery, as exemplified in Europe, is greater than is usually supposed. Certain it is that the rivers, the forests, the unshorn mountain-sides and unbridged chasms of that vast country, are of a character peculiar to America alone—a lavish and large-featured sublimity, (if we may so express it,) quite dissimilar to the picturesque of all other countries.” (Willis, *American Scenery*, p. vi.)

18. Willis continues: “The wandering artist avoids every thing that is modern, and selects his point of view so as to bring prominently into his sketch, the castle, or the cathedral, which history or antiquity has hallowed. The traveller visits each spot in the same spirit—ridding himself, as far as possible, of common and present associations, to feed his mind on the historical and legendary. The objects and habits of reflection in both traveller and artist undergo in America a direct revolution. He who journeys here, if he would not have the eternal succession of lovely natural objects—‘Lie like a load on the weary eye’—must feed his imagination on the future.” (Ibid., p. 3.)

19. It is true, of course, that projecting this definite temporal framework absorbed nineteenth-century Americans of having to think about the history of the land before their arrival—the history of Native Americans.

20. Other Americans saw this less as a liability than as an opportunity. Here is Thomas Cole: “The painter of American scenery has, indeed, privileges superior to any other. All nature here is new to art. No Tivolis, Ternis, Mont Blancs, Plinlimmons, hackneyed and worn by the daily pencils of hundreds; but primeval forests, virgin lakes and waterfalls, feasting his eye with new delights, ... hallowed ... for his own favored pencil.” (Cole, quoted in McKinsey, *Niagara Falls*, p. 56.)


22. In fact, a successful Northwest Passage was not made until 1906, when Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen did it in a converted forty-seven-ton herring boat. But until the polar ice caps were successfully melted by global warming, no passage was ever commercially viable. Amundsen’s progress through the ice was slow; more important, his route to avoid more ice had put him in dangerously shallow water where other boats would surely get stuck. Even as late as 1969, when the specially reinforced supertanker SS *Manhattan* completed the journey (behind the Canadian icebreaker *Sir John A. Macdonald*), testing the route for the transport of oil, the route was not deemed cost-effective and the Trans-Alaska Pipeline was built instead. It is only in the past few years, thanks to global warming, that commercial transport through the Northwest Passage has become profitable.

