

Kevin Kelly : We are Standing in Infinity

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[See table of contents](#)

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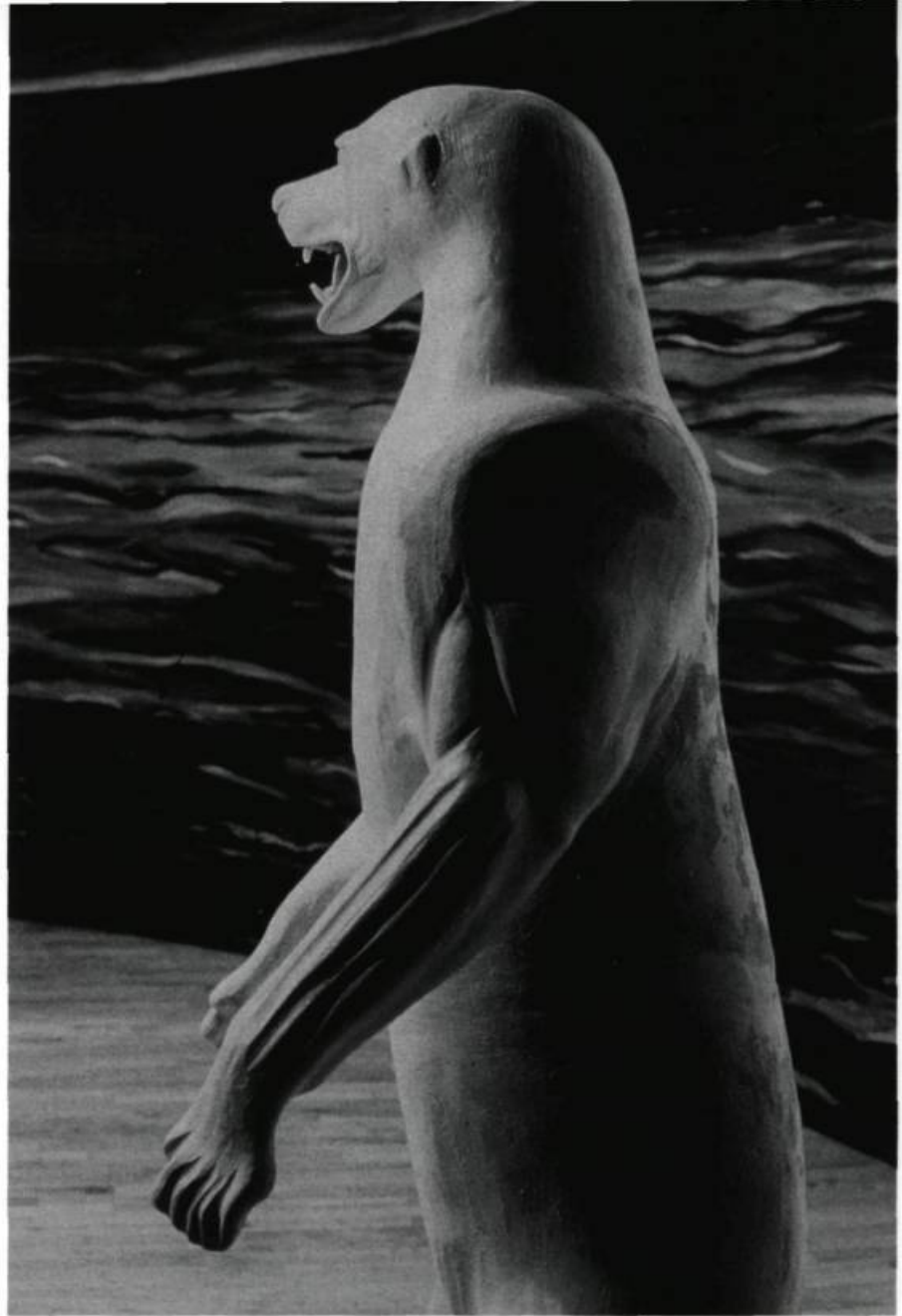
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we are standing in infinity

KEVIN KELLY

John K. Grande

"I was at a private view of the Diorama; it is in part a transparency; the spectator is in a dark chamber, and it is very pleasing, and has great illusion. It is without the pale of the art, because its object is deception. The art pleases by reminding, not deceiving", wrote John Constable on witnessing the first painted diorama by Louis Daguerre at Regent's Park in London in 1823.¹ The Romantic painters' fascination with the diorama was entirely consequent with their vision of a natural world that was at once sublime and yet also an idealized simulation of reality. For them, the act of recreating nature was entirely caught up in a subjective vision, one that affirmed humanity's spiritual title to her boundless reserves.

Today's art is moving increasingly towards images that are denaturalized and decontextualized. Our sense of identity is now stigmatized by the ways in which communications technology projects, transmits and prints images. The West's Judeo-Christian traditions with their idealized notions of transcendence, on the one hand, and these effects of technology, on the other, channel our

Kevin Kelly, *Reconstructed Landscape #6* (1991). 10 x 3 m. / Bear 181 x 93 x 84 cm. Oil on canvas + polyurethane.

responses and choices of imagery in art. The sublime ideals of transcendence that once superseded nature have now been fused with a technological bias that inadvertently decontextualizes nature. Kevin Kelly has been involved in producing paintings and art installations that address these questions over the past six years directly or indirectly through the forum of the diorama presentation. Constructed in a 180 degree, semi-circular fashion like the habitats one might see in a Natural History Museum, the very format of Kevin Kelly's first diorama presentations created the same effect without idealizing, but instead by directly importing environmental sites wholesale. They revealed the meanings we apply to nature to be wholly inconsequent with what nature actually is. *Reconstructed Landscape #1* (1988-89), exhibited at the Surrey Art Gallery in British Columbia, recreated the cavernous image of an open-pit minesite near Black Lake, Quebec, eviscerated and denuded by resource extraction. The half-ton of steel filings, actual resource elements imported wholesale and placed on the gallery floor in front of the piece, aroused strong feelings of environmental dislocation. The contrast between an idealized vision of nature and a constructed, experiential one were as literal as they were explicit. By questioning how our idea of nature causes us to conceive of nature in an objective, categorical way, while we presume our impressions to be entirely subjective, Kelly's *Reconstructed Landscape #1* elucidated the Cartesian dilemma over subjective certainty and objective knowledge in a way that was at once unequivocal and possible.

The following year Kevin Kelly portrayed the desecration of one of the remotest regions in the world, Canada's far north, in *Reconstructed Landscape #4* (1990). The foreground was divided in its centre by the dark line of a coal trench construction, painted with tar along its sides. Piles of slate covered with lichen gave the real sensation of being in a northern arctic environment, as did the distant

our reading of reality, and not vice versa... "the extraordinary, indeed pathological, disjunction of nature from its manufactured results" stems from "a largely mythic interpretation of technics. ... when we say that a product, food, or even therapy is "natural", we usually mean that it is "pure" or "unadulterated", not that it comes from nature."²

At this point a secondary issue began to arise out of Kelly's dioramas. While the meaning of both art and culture are inimically tied to the processes of nature, we still cannot exactly define what exactly nature is. It can variously be a word, a subject, an objective generalization, an issue or a state of being. *Reconstructed Landscape #5* (1987-91) exhibited at the Living Art Museum in Reykjavik, Iceland approached this question passively. Kelly did not transform anything, but instead let environmental reality speak for itself. A large scale ten by twelve foot photo mural of a forest in Holland with a single species of trees arranged in neat sequentially ordered rows was presented as a simple record of what looked like a "natural" environment entirely designed by man. It is a potent symbol of humanity's urbane capacity to rationalize the external landscape for purposes of maximal resource efficiency; the only real reference to a wilderness scene in the installation was a stuffed red fox transfixed in the foreground, a trophy killed and prepared by taxidermists to present a living image of nature. With *Reconstructed Landscape #6* (1991) Kelly incorporated a life-size plastic mold of a bear (the type used by taxidermists) into the foreground of a diluvian seascape whose waters churned with an eerie, blood-red colour that felt like a cross between Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893) and Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-19), devoid of people and minus the raft.

Reconstructed Landscape #3 (1990) exhibited at La Chambre Blanche in Quebec City did more than just reveal the dichotomy between an objective and subjective view of nature (the ideal and the reality). Here, the diorama no longer functioned like a kind of dead theatre or lifeless simulator of natural environments. The viewer's perceptual inner response became the issue amid a circle of video monitors measuring four metres in diameter and buried amid ten cm of dirt in a darkened room. While at first sight the projected images of flowing water from the screens were perceived as beautiful and compelling, their initial attraction soon gives way to the feeling that something was fundamentally wrong with these images. The whirlpool effect of simulated video images of water flowing at varied speeds in the same direction was both ethereal and unsettling, particularly when, for one brief moment, the water turned blood red. The inherent connections between an inner response and the external stimuli were both re-established and seemed strangely disconnected. While the environmental cues simulated "real" experience using video technology, the immediate, physical and sensory effect erased the borders between the represented subject and our perceptual response to the piece.

Dioramas are as succinct a paraphrase for the way represented experience supersedes lived experience as one can get, particularly when its "object is deception". They also epitomize an attitude to aesthetics that was firmly established in the 19th century, where artists actively believed in their spiritually transcendent (read superior) relation to nature. The sublime or beatific landscape anaesthetized its subject and removed all the visual blemishes, impurities just as modern-day billboard advertising does, simply by decontextualizing and reconstituting the subject or environment artificially to maximize its transcendent visual effect. The first approach is purely visual, the second conceptual, but both are proprioceptive in that they engender a perceptual response to reality that denaturalizes, either through one's own self conception, or as a response to the latest tools of technology. In *The Dream of the Earth* Thomas Berry writes of the power of the transcendent vision and how it has affected our attitudes to the environment: "Just as the doctrine of divine transcendence took away the pervasive divine presence to the natural world, so the millennial vision of a blessed future left all present modes of existence in a degraded status. All things were in an unholy condition. Everything needed to be transformed. This meant



horizon of Kelly's painted diorama backdrop. *Reconstructed Landscape #4* made it clear that even in places farthest from civilization, including Canada's arctic, the wilderness landscape is being mapped, divided, rationalized for future exploitation. Descartes' presumption that matter by and of itself could not possibly have any (conscious) intention loomed large in this piece. Standing between the lines of Kelly's infinite horizon line, within the trench that divided the piece into two sections, it wasn't hard to read between the lines: our resource planning strategies are guided by profit, pure and simple, while considerations about resource management and nature conservation are mere window dressing for the publicity departments of the head offices of multinational corporations. Is it any surprise that in our

Kevin Kelly, *We are Standing in Infinity* (1992). 20 x 3 metres. Oil paint, wood & paper.

para-consumer guise, we are generally unable to decode the toys, instruments, clothes and even foodstuffs we consume in our daily reality? They all, after all, have their origins in the culture of nature. In *The Ecology of Freedom*, Murray Bookchin suggests it is social coding that guides



Kevin Kelly, *Reconstructed Landscape #1* (1988-89). 3 x 10 metres; Diorama / 3.5 x 2.2 metres foreground environment. Oil on canvas, rocks, lichen, tar, wood, steel filings.

that anything unused was to be used if the very purpose of its existence was to be realized. Nothing in its natural state was acceptable.³ Kevin Kelly's dioramas suggest that the Romantic painters' vision of the landscape was, for its very idealism, no less a simulation, an escape from reality than the art of our era. The suggestion is that the act of representation now finds itself caught in a double bind, intricately linked to our civilization's social, religious and historic biases while it also finds itself channelled into the narrow, so-called "innovative" yet de-contextualized language of the latest mass communications technology.

Kevin Kelly approached the issue of social and corporeal denaturalization by shifting his focus from a macro-cosmic scale to a micro-cosmic one in a series of five small-scale curved wall-piece dioramas, collectively titled *Skin Disease Landscapes* (1990-1991). The entire organism of the earth's surface became a metaphor for the human body; its weathered skin, afflicted by unknown illnesses, passively awaiting its own destruction, armed only with life itself. The inherent fragility and lifeless appearance of these scarred, textural landscapes functions as a paradoxical emblem of an organism in a state of corporeal depletion. Its decay and transformation continues pathetically, regardless of whether the initial causes were natural or induced by human intervention.

In *Dreaming with Open Eyes*, Michael Tucker suggests that many of the problems we now face in the art of our times have to do with the language we use to describe our history and culture. He suggests we must strive to qualify the language we use so as to speak of what is other, that which Joseph Campbell says keeps us "transparent to the transcendent". Tucker states that this "...does not imply any escapist refusal to face the world of social facts. On the contrary; it suggests the need to gain access to other energies, energies which may help us to turn the pain and confusion of so many of today's 'social facts' into healing human potentiality."⁴ We get something of this feeling from Kevin Kelly's most recent installation titled *We are Standing in Infinity* (1992), exhibited at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in Lethbridge this past year. Comprising two enclosures curved to 350 degrees that formed the shape of a figure eight, like an infinity symbol, it awakened feelings of mortality as much as of physical presence. The entrances to the two sections of the piece became narrow passages through which one could enter into each section. While the subject of the piece obviously had to do with Kelly's treat-

ment of textural, light and spatial effects within these constructions, the skin or outer bodies of the pieces made the viewer increasingly aware of his/her own bodily presence. One projected a warm, womb-like feeling, its translucent, paper skin was the personification of light and contrasted the near black interior of the other, painted on wood. Both had expanded abstract brushwork, but the painterly effects seemed as much a comment on the redundancy of the formalist language of 20th century art, its gratuitous belief in the regimen of familiar painterly language norms, including post-war abstraction, as an assertion that art communicates best when it remains in the process of becoming. A full 60' in length and measuring ten feet in height, Kelly's architecture of infinity elicited sensations of pure physical presence in the viewer. The notion of a subject or a signifier became secondary to the experiential feeling the work projected. Kevin Kelly is now in the process of completing *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1993-94). Based upon the 16th century anatomical drawings of Andreas Vesalius and Regnier De Graaf, Kelly's painted "botanical studies" will actually depict parts of the male and female anatomy in such a way that they will resemble plants in a landscape. When exhibited, the series will include a four-panel curved environment within which the viewer will stand

to experience a landscape of representation wholly in keeping with Kelly's interest in the ontological dilemmas inherent in our perception of history and art. In *The Phenomenon of Life* Hans Jonas suggests these ontological dilemmas are a result of the conceptual splitting of "objective" and "subjective" categories of meaning in the modern era. Jonas believes the two are not naturally opposed but have created a crisis in ethics that can only be resolved if they are brought together again from the "objective" end, that is to say, through a revision of the idea of nature. He proffers a principle of ethics ultimately grounded neither in the autonomy of the self nor in the needs of the community, but in an objective alignment with the nature of things. In this way personal fulfillment and a concern with universal substance can be achieved.⁵ ◆

NOTES :

1. Harold Osborne, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Art*, Oxford U. Press, 1984, pp. 316-317.
2. Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom ; The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*, Palo Alto : Chesire Books, 1982, pp. 309-310.
3. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, (San Francisco : Sierra Club Books, 1990), p. 115.
4. Michael Tucker, *Dreaming with Open Eyes ; The Shamanic Spirit in 20th Century Art and Culture*, (San Francisco : Aquarian Harper, 1992), p. 47.
5. Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life* cited in *The Ecology of Freedom*, p. xi.

L'auteur examine deux des points importants soulevés par les dioramas, les installations et les peintures créés par Kevin Kelly au cours des six dernières années. Le premier concerne les notions historiques de transcendance et de sublime, habituellement associées en art à l'époque romantique, mais dont les images idéalisées de la nature prédominent encore dans le langage visuel de la publicité et de l'art moderne. Le second point implique la façon dont la technologie des communications décontextualise le sujet, construit, omet et transmet des images de notre environnement. L'auteur suggère que les dioramas « Paysages reconstruits » de Kevin Kelly rendent apparent le gouffre qui sépare une vision idéalisée de la nature et une vision issue de l'expérience, mais que nos définitions actuelles de la nature demeurent inadéquates et irrésolues. M. Grande conteste la présomption de Descartes, selon laquelle la matière ne peut possiblement avoir aucune intention (consciente). La plus récente exposition de Kelly, *We Are Standing in Infinity*, présentée l'année dernière à la Southern Alberta Art Gallery, une installation environnementale qui faisait allusion aux limitations des conventions formalistes d'autrefois, telles que celles de la peinture abstraite, se rapportait autant aux propres réponses physiques du spectateur aux environnements présentés qu'au «sujet» représenté ou qu'à l'installation en tant que réalité objective. En conclusion, Grande souligne le problème ontologique sous-jacent de la scission conceptuelle moderniste entre l'«objectif» et le «subjectif» soulevé par les oeuvres de Kelly, en citant Hans Jonas qui suggère que cette opposition artificielle ne peut être résolue que par un alignement objectif avec la nature des choses.