



DO YOU READ ME?

Timelines

By John Carson

Pittsburgh Filmmakers Gallery

Pittsburgh

January 28–March 13, 2011

For those approaching middle age, reorienting for the future often includes reflection, assessment, and reconnecting with friends, family, and home. John Carson addressed these and other issues in his recent installation “Timelines” at Pittsburgh Filmmakers Gallery. Carson used a previous project, “Friend Map” (1976), as a starting point for this new endeavor. In the process, he not only examined his own life and the connections he has made by interviewing friends and family from his native Northern Ireland, he also came full circle by reinvigorating this older project with a dose of new technology. In “Friend Map,” he photographed friends and family and then pasted the small yearbook-like pictures on a map to show where they lived. In “Timelines,” Carson revisited forty of the original 108 subjects and created a video installation with large projections of footage from the interviews, employing minimal postproduction. Three separate video tracks were projected onto three walls of the gallery while an interview of the artist’s Aunt Sophie was screened on a modestly sized television. Outside of the gallery hung recent 9 x 12-inch color photographs of the participants, taken in the setting of their interviews and labeled with their names; across the hall was the original piece of artwork.

Each subject is filmed in one location: either in what appears to be their home, their workplace, or simply against a solid backdrop. Lack of postproduction allows the viewer to concentrate on Carson’s subjects as opposed to the making of the work, and the piece functions as a series of talking portraits. A viewer could look at the interviewees, or attempt to find a position to hear them. To do so, one had to stand in just the right spot under each projection’s corresponding suspended speaker. With great concentration, viewers were able to drown out the background din from the other projections and hear what each person was saying during his or her interview. Once able to filter out the white noise, viewers were rewarded with some insightful monologues.

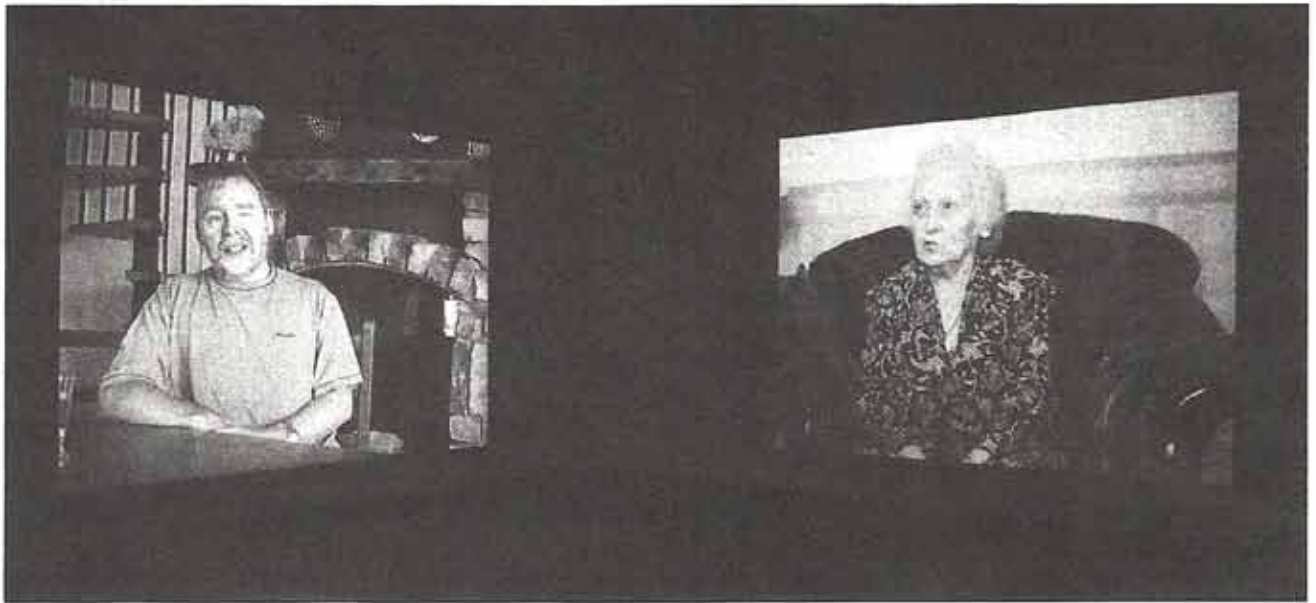
Carson apparently prompted the interviewees to discuss topics such as their worries, dreams, occupations, regrets, disappointments, ambitions, and feelings about aging. Yet, other than the interview on the smaller screen with Carson’s aunt, in which the artist is occasionally heard conversing, the artist has kept himself out of the piece. Therefore, the viewer assumes the position of interviewer and sees and hears the interviewees—including Carson himself on occasion—responding to the questions. The unpretentious quality of both the subjects and the production allows the participant to feel comfortable watching the interviews. One senses that these people have a close connection to Carson because of the familiar way they interact with the camera; they are for the most part at ease, suggesting they are discussing their lives with a close friend. This familiarity ultimately transfers to the audience. Most of the subjects are from Northern Ireland and lived through The Troubles. Although the strife is often discussed with a certain nonchalance, it makes an impact when specific details of a violent event occasionally come to light. For the most part, however, the focus is on the universal qualities of what it means to be human.



VOL. 38, No. 6



USA \$5.50/CAN \$7.50



With the advent of Facebook, Skype, and Twitter, the way we communicate has changed. The verdict is still out as to whether or not these new media networks have ultimately improved our lives. Often these newer modes produce a condensed form of communication lacking in complexity and nuance. “Timelines” certainly forced participants to ponder how we communicate today. From the old-fashioned black-and-white snapshots cut and pasted onto the map to the more high-tech film projections that give the impression of home movies, Carson’s strategy is arguably lo-fi. In an age where the relevance of the visual arts in galleries and museums is waning and their place within the broader culture has been marginalized—and where the masses tend toward the internet, television, and commercial film—Carson’s approach lends itself well to a middle-aged and older demographic. One wonders about the possibility of reaching younger generations.

“Timelines” strips away pretense and prods us to think about how we define ourselves. Ultimately, we do so through our connection to our home, how we carry on and build meaningful relationships, and through whom and how we love. This is what makes us human and what Carson has recognized through the process of going full circle. Carson brings us into the lives of his subjects by allowing us to connect with them. We feel we are there with them, but ultimately we are both connected and separated from them by this same technology.

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Above
From the series “Timelines” (2011) by John Carson; photo by Gern Roberts

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