

Introduction to Arturo Herrera's *Almost Home* by Lynne Cooke

Diptychs are relatively rare in the history of Western art. Most often, they take the form of paired, identically scaled panels, whose twin structures posit a duality that typically resides in contrast and opposition rather than complementarity. Life and death, positive and negative, before and after - such binaries become their underlying themes and in turn evoke other antitheses equally fundamental to Western thought and culture: good and evil, light and dark, inside and outside...

In *Almost Home*, Arturo Herrera invites the viewer of his website project to become a player in an ersatz game that involves such fundamentals, albeit now couched in the vocabulary of childhood fantasy. The spectator is offered the option of creating diptychs to his or her own taste from the hundred collages which constitute the storehouse or deck in Herrera's singular pack of cards. Yet this act of composition is inherently constrained, if not compromised, by the fact that, given that each collage is programmed to appear randomly, even the most patient player may never fully apprehend the full spectrum in this mutant series. More importantly, since the presence of any particular collage is serendipitously determined, the viewer can only accept or reject a pairing, eliminating one or the other half of the diptych until a preferred combination appears.

To make "sense" of any conjunction is the gauntlet thrown to the player, a challenge heightened by the fact that each component is in itself a visual conundrum. Further dramatizing this insouciant provocation is the barely perceptible movement or change that occurs in some twenty of the images. For the less than highly attentive viewer these subtle shifts may pass unnoticed, or will be glimpsed tardily, too late to be properly observed, identified, and analyzed. Moreover, when a player finally spies these irregular, often almost imperceptible and incongruous shifts, he or she is likely to become even more unsettled, or disturbed, prematurely anxious in case others pass by unregarded. Hyperalert, afraid of missing the telling transformation, the revealing sleight of hand, the clue that betrays or deflects, the viewer engages more deeply in the once innocuous situation so that it increasingly assumes an enthralling emotional charge. Whether such transmutations are interpreted as whimsical and arbitrary, capricious and teasing, or, conversely, portentous clues, crucial keys, to unravelling an otherwise enigmatic situation, depends on the kind of psychic investment with which the player participates. Filled with expectation, yet unable to do more than accept or reject these chance sequences and couplings, the player is brought to acknowledge how slight is the possibility of accounting for this familiar realm. Here revealed in its most basic because most unconstrained guise, it betrays itself as slippery and elusive where formerly it was familiar and comforting, known and knowable.

The alluring glow that the luminous screen imparts to each construction melds the diverse elements in the collage into a seamless whole. Once differences in paper stock, texture, weight, and color are eliminated, a convincing and compelling illusion supervenes. This is a world whose wholeness cannot easily be dissected, for its fractures have been concealed, notwithstanding the miscellany of sources from which the components have been culled: comics, children's books, cards, and cartoons. This illusory wholeness counters the mysterious incongruity that marks the protagonists and events within, as figures metamorphize, mutate, and hybridize in a rambunctiously rampant, polymorphously perverse play. As unfettered desire constantly overturns the rules of decorum transgression proves at once destructive and blithely creative. Unfettered, liberated from the norms of order, convention, consequence, and causality, the tropes of childhood imaginary are reversed, and, inverted, their boundaries elided so that inside and outside, micro and macro, and most other coordinates become indeterminate if not illegible. The virtual space of the screen, the fantasy space of childhood tales and psychic space, collapse into each other. Yet while seeming to give free reign to wishes, impulses, and desires previously thwarted or sublimated or simply unrecognized or unacknowledged, Herrera rigorously resists romanticizing the image repertoire of childhood memory. He regalvanizes those transgressive impulses, at once destructive, transforming, and transporting that lie at the heart of play for both child and adult alike, and that therefore render the ludic a prime locus for manifestations of the unconscious in some of its most untrammelled and ecstatic displays. As Maria Tatar argues, by harnessing the messy, subversive energy characteristic of the child to the shameless erotic élan of the adult, he disrupts certain staples in the contemporary collective cultural archive. "Almost Home" invites the spectator to participate in a game of consequences that is guaranteed to instill a state of perpetual hermeneutic crisis as a prologue to regressive yet seductive states of wonder and desire.