

Running Ahead

JONAH GREENSTEIN

In 1877 a painter named Claude Monet made twelve paintings of a train station in Paris called the Gare Saint-Lazare. He wasn't necessarily interested in the identity of the thing itself, but in the way the light made it look at different times on different days. His painting, and his way of seeing, was a function of light and color, not of line and shape. He was more interested in the process of seeing without perception than in perceiving the train station itself. Years went by and art scholars decided, after the fact, that the train station was important in itself; it was a relic of modernity. Scientists discovered that our vision really does detect lines and shapes, rather than light and color alone. People do see with meaning, with association. Monet's very attempt at an objective rendition—a rendition of pure sensation—was itself subjective. It was subject to his philosophy, which in turn was subject to his place in time—the 19th century, from which there was no escape. In 1877, Monet could always be right.

At a more recent point in time, Matthew Goulish wrote an essay called “How Does a Work Work Where?” In it, he breaks the question of the title into parts. Part three asks, “What is where?” and he answers, “Where is inside” (207). The human mind, he tells us, is analogous to a windowless car that travels “its own particular road” (207). He says the car must be windowless because everything outside exists as a point-of-view from inside the car, and thus everything is inside the car. He is describing subjectivity. Everything exists in its own right, but we can only experience it through the lens of our individual perception. Part of that everything includes other windowless cars—other people, and hence, other people's subjectivities. Goulish thinks everything exists within *those* cars as well, but it is a *different* everything. Because each car is a different mind, each contains a different everything. This is why Monet's paintings can be about sight—his sight—and about the train station itself at the same time. Different people and different times yield different perceptions, different everythings. Perception constructs identity.

When I arrive at the High Line Park in Lower West Side Manhattan—a park built on the site of an old elevated freight train line, 30 feet off the ground—I offer it a chance to assume a new identity. I travel down it in my windowless car, seeing it and making it.

A park sign reads *Keep It Wild, Keep It On The Path*. This contradiction is spelled out all over the park. Uncontrolled, uncultivated, unrestrained, yet still a modern boardwalk. Grasses and flowers grow over unused railroad tracks. The tracks still serve as remnants of the elevated structure's original purpose—to allow freight traffic to run independently from civilian traffic in the industrial district. Now, a variety of bright green grasses, skinny trees, and the occasional newly blossomed flower cover up the tracks. But only in the designated areas.

The people here today are appropriately obedient. They are couples: a guy with his hand on a girl's back, older couples (now complete with strollers) and small groups of middle-aged friends catching up. A cacophony of sounds follows the plants' lead, echoing over the tracks unpredictably. A sourceless bagpipe pierces the unintelligible mix of banal conversations. Beneath, and from the sides, traffic boosts the volume. Yet despite the aural disorder, the pedestrian traffic is as systematic as the automotive traffic below. Keep to your right; pass if no one is oncoming; you can park here on the sides.

The benches and reclining chairs on the sides are constructed of the same processed wood as the boardwalk, and they seem to grow out of the floor. The recliners are grouped together to systemize and categorize the park's visitors. One size does not fit all. A group of four chairs is for families and friends. A group of three is for a couple and a stray extrovert. Lonely chairs are for lonely introverts. Farther ahead, a section of tiered seating, like steps, bulges out of the tracks' contour. The arbitrary auditorium allows for a centered view of 9th Avenue traffic, a system of movement parallel to the foot traffic above, which follows the rusted tracks like a shy new employee. The park's designers have foisted new purpose on this place.

A couple of tourists are milling around. They've got the button-down, breast-pocket shirts tucked into jeans, the guidebook in hand, three superfluous bags, two brimmed hats, and three pairs of sunglasses each. I bet they even broke out the SPF30 earlier; they look *ready*. They've got that walk that says, well, we're here, commence the overly scheduled afternoon plan. He points, she smiles. *There's* the view. No other views. Just this one, where people are congregating. I bet they've been to this park before; they know where to stand. They must be thinking, we did the High Line, mission accom-

plished. As if there could be one High Line. As if their experience were universal.

Meanwhile, I see a pale, geeky looking guy with glasses, a satchel, and an iPhone that refuses to be pocketed. He's looking after a small child who runs quickly ahead each time his guardian catches up with him. The boring adult reacts as you'd expect, ambivalently intoning "stay on the path" and "walk please" to the poor kid. Despite the man's efforts to squelch any and all enthusiasm, the kid is fascinated by the old railroad tracks on the sides, so much so that he nearly falls into them when he leans on a weak rope that is acting as a barrier. A monotone "careful" and "yeah, they're old railroad tracks" are all the acting guardian manages to say, never looking up from his phone. He's somewhere else, but the kid is right here, right now. Well, not anymore. Now he's already way ahead of this middle-aged dude, who seems somehow similar to the conspicuously dated brick buildings up ahead.

Cynthia Ozick's essay "The Synthetic Sublime" contains a sprawling portrait of Manhattan. She describes the city in all four dimensions—from one river to the other, from the street to the tops of buildings, from summer to winter. Each neighborhood is outlined with respect to its inhabitants, and the ways they continually change. She says, "[New York] disappears and then it disappears again; or say that it metamorphoses between disappearances, so that every seventy-five years or so another city bursts out, as if against nature" (217). The city avoids letting things stay the way they are, or the way they will naturally go—instead, motivated decisions step in to guide it somewhere specific. A fear of natural chaos keeps people seeking design and re-design. Skyscrapers hide the water that surrounds us and frame the sky. Tenements become Tenement Museums, turning a past reality into a static representation. Yet the city primarily tries to forget the past. It is concerned with the functionality of its aspects—like the High Line Park—in the present. As Ozick says, "It means to impress the hereandnow, which it autographs with an insouciant wrecking ball" (218). The abrupt changes leave their marks. Visible from the High Line are clusters of brick buildings, concrete here and there, and striking, warped forms of steel and glass. The city is like that kid, running quickly ahead the minute anyone catches up, never looking back. It doesn't know what it wants to be, so it tries to be everything at once. It forcefully anticipates the next new thing instead of allowing it to happen. It is full of nervous anxiety about growing up.

I don't blame it. The railroad tracks remind me of the active railway that runs through my hometown in Iowa. I crossed the tracks every day on my way to school. Endless coal trains would make me late, and I would explain this

with a polite smile to the school secretary, who knew me well and forgave me easily. The secretary and I both knew my excuse was worthless, but she accepted it because she had a certain perception of who I was, just like everyone else. Everyone had a well-known reputation of one kind or another, because only 3,000 people lived in the town. I used to call it an island in a sea of corn fields, from which I desperately needed to escape. Ironically, I landed myself on a literal island, Manhattan, from which the surrounding water is barely visible. The city is just as conflicted as high school me, trying to satisfy everyone's expectations at once. The city compresses the widest spectrum possible between its natural boundaries. Walk ten blocks and you'll find yourself in another world. You can escape without leaving. You can find a new identity anywhere you go.

We must search for something new for fear of becoming relics, like the disused railway of the park. Grass grows over the tracks and their function changes; they've become something different. Yet time warps all design, and the unexpected always occurs. The nature of things will change over time, and the responses and perceptions of other people—in their other “cars” — are never the same. Commitment to one purpose is terrifying. Objects that we now view in museums were once objects to be used. “Artifact” is a status earned by age, but also one person's arbitrary decision. These transitions are unpredictable. We like our tracks to go where we built them to go, and the grasses to grow over them only when we let them. We like using a sign to tell everyone that it's intentional. We'd like to think our lives are the way they are because that's the way we mean them to be. Yet when Monet meant for his train to be just light, just color, to many eyes it could not be anything but a train.

There seems to be some confusion over what Spencer Finch's “The River That Flows Both Ways” is meant to be. I suppose it is an artwork, because the park's website labels it as such, but to most it's pretty much just a window. It's situated in one of the grottos formed when the tracks barrel their way through a building, a series of colored window panes that cool the warm afternoon light. Each pane gets its color from a different photo of the Hudson River, taken at a different time. The concept reminds me of one of Monet's contemporaries, Paul Cézanne, who painted by working on different portions of his compositions at different times. Finch's work takes the idea of sensation and re-appropriates it with modern technology, linking together different pixels—with different timestamps—rather than different brushstrokes. But the idea flows both ways through time, as Finch's title suggests.

Time, indeed, is what prevents the image in both cases from being the same every moment they return to it.

Most of the neat grid of earthy and aquamarine glass panes is in shadow. On the left, the sun manages to beam in, transforming some of them into trapezoids and triangles. It turns black to brown, brown to red, olive to char-treuse. Spencer Finch tried to capture a part of nature, hold it down and keep it permanent. But the sun doesn't allow it, continuing to change this record of the river into something unexpected. Farther to the left, the actual Hudson River is getting plenty of sun. The silent blue ripples combine into a blinding white, a light source the river can claim for itself. The glass grid acts as a shield from the overexposed outdoors, filtering the brightness into the cool interior of the tunnel. It is unadorned, dim, and actually a little grimy. When viewed closely, Finch's shaded panels share some of the filth, but the sunlit shapes radiate with an uncommon purity. The title of the work is the translated Native American name for the Hudson River. Ironic that this stand-in, this clone, this synthetic reproduction, actually acts as a barrier between the viewer and the *real* object of the title. It is pristine protection. It is steel and glass and postmodern. It affords an escape from nature. It is a sterile substitution. But it is dependent. It needs the outdoors to maintain its interior energy. It needs the sun to come alive, to change. The sun's position not only affected the acquisition of these pixels, but now transforms some panes into glowing shapes of colored light. Others remain dim, dingy pieces of glass. The artist is allowing Nature's unpredictability to affect his work. By making chaos the product of his intentions, he defeats it. Or, at the very least, he admits it to be necessary.

Finch's piece is also exposed to the various passersby. My first encounter with the glowing glass was put to a reverberating soundtrack courtesy of a solo singer/guitarist. He sang Oasis's "Don't Look Back in Anger," but the words were wasted on an audience that hardly gave the art itself a second glance. It looks too much like the blue tinted windows on the office building across the street. It looks too much like an afterthought. It is too opaque. We came here to see the river, and this wall of glass is in the way. You can't call something a river and expect it to become one. We came here to be outside, and Finch asks us to go back into hiding. It is too close to the overtly functional metal maintenance doors beneath it. It looks more like it's there to hold up the ceiling than to be looked at, let alone thought about. Perhaps it's the lack of explicit reactions that makes the work work, to use Goulish's language. There's a freedom in forgetting about other people's perceptions, in knowing that they'll be different no matter what. Then again, the pedestrians' indiffer-

ence is itself a reaction, and perhaps an upsetting one. Change is frightening because we *do* value what others think, and ambivalence can easily seem like an act of betrayal.

The battle between intention and reception overflows from Finch's work into the park itself. It once served an industrial purpose, and now it serves a public one. It is a redesigned relic. A green tree bursts forth from gray wooden boards. Life and death, past and present, collide. This happens within the park's other public artwork as well. Titled "Autumn on the Hudson Valley with Branches," Valerie Hegarty's mixed media piece hangs on the chain link fence that ends the walking area and begins the construction area. It is a painted canvas, dripping and torn and falling apart. Its wooden frame begins as a construction of processed two-by-fours and ends, on the right, as a collection of raw, chaotic branches. Twigs and leaves protrude from the painting where twigs and leaves are depicted. Leaves, real and re-imagined, catch the same evening light that is represented in paint. Everything shivers and quakes in the wind. A hole in the canvas, right where a tree is depicted, reveals the wood frame underneath. Forms betray themselves as such. The representative meets the real; they are two entities that seek the same label. Together, they weather the forces of nature, producing a beauty you couldn't intentionally craft. Hegarty has committed to putting her name on something without yet knowing what it will be. She says, I submit myself to being in limbo, to being responsible for what will come, regardless of my lack of control over it.

She doesn't seem to know what she wants it to be, who *she* wants to be; she must be confident in her own evolution, unlike the surrounding city. Brick and steel and glass, cement and stone and corners and curves all compete for control over the label "New York." But the city won't let its identity be tied down; it demands to be something different for everyone. In a different era—and also our own—Monet's train station manages to harbor coexisting, yet different, identities. It is an industrial phenomenon, yet at the same time it is nothing more than paint and light. The train of the High Line is also two things at once, designed and unrestrained. We can label it, identify it, decide how we feel about it, and later, when we've become different people ourselves, we can do it all over again. While an experience only exists in the moment, it can become something new in retrospect. We can record it any way we want to, and we can even make it lie for us as we sit in our cars believing that everything is in there with us. But of course it's not, and that fact's a bit harder to see from the inside out. Often the records are lies, because the lies put us in control. Our lives become a series of photo albums, and the photos are lying to us because we asked them to.

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