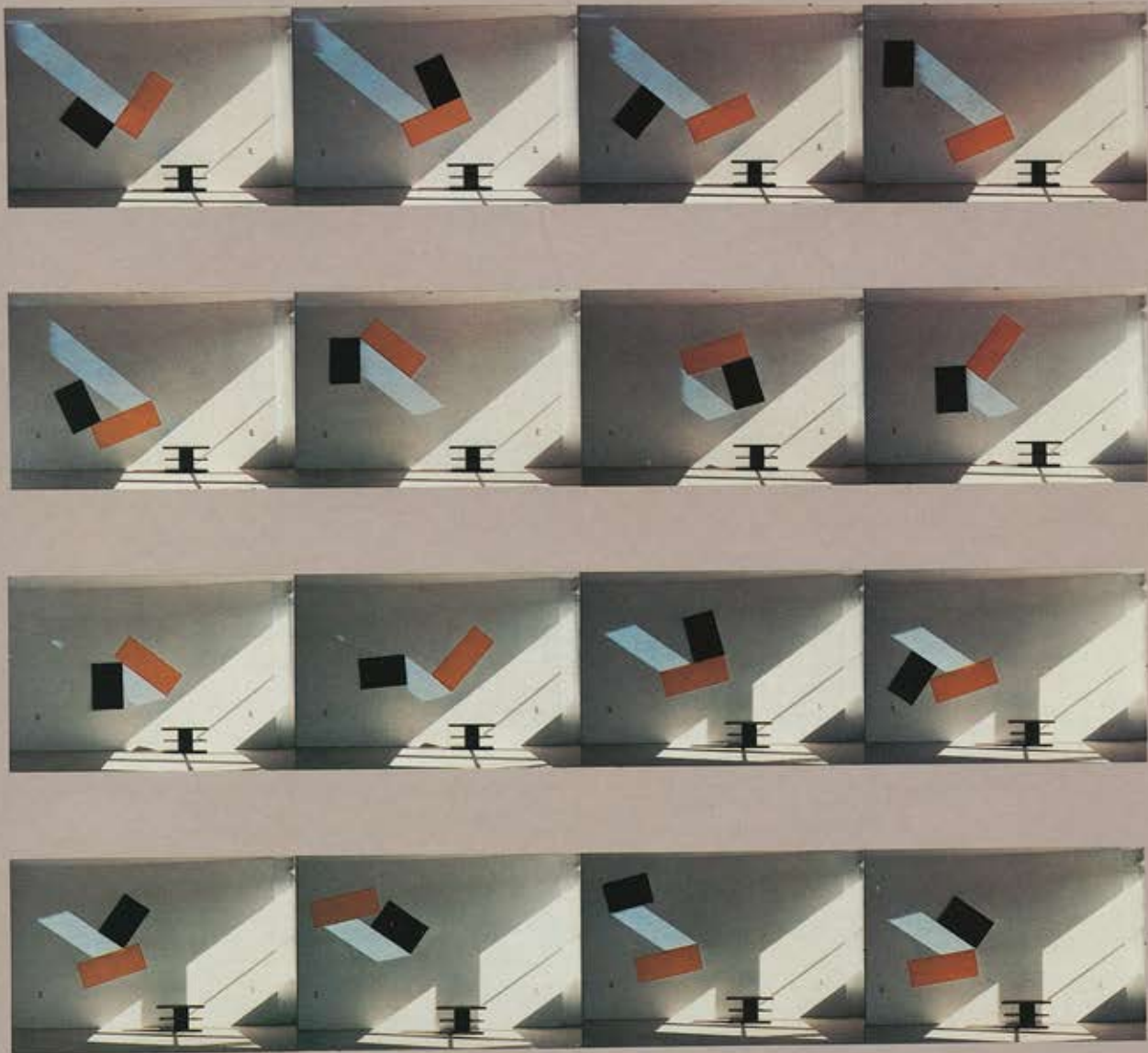


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## COMMUNIQUE



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# Travelers' Cheques and the Rhetoric of Portability

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by Bart Testa

**N**o news that travel is an obsessive subject for North American artists. The culture of the Enlightenment and the continent's vast spaces have conspired to bring forth a culture of exploration whose denizens are keen with the desire to bring back knowledge mapped on portable surfaces; a tradition, then, that not even the electronic media have robbed of energy and imagination.<sup>1</sup> Eager with awareness, three photographers—Bob de Slob, Henri Robideau and Marcus Schubert—take not just as their means, but as their subject as well, the photograph in its role as compaction of experiences of sight, time, space and motion. Late-comers, true, all three work through diverse types of self-reference to pronounce again a rhetoric of portability, a thematics of travel.

opposite page: Henri Robideau, 1984; caption reads *Giant Collection of miniature houses built by Percy Linden adorns his front yard garden in downtown Vancouver, B.C., July 23, 1983. His sign reads: TAKE A LITTLE EXTRA TIME TO-DAY TO STOP AND SMELL THE ROSES LONG THE WAY.*

Henry Robideau, 1982: caption reads *Giant sidewalk re-creation of the famous Frans Hals painting, "Two Boys Singing", on Bloor Street near Yonge, Toronto, Ontario, October 22, 1982. Members of the private sector demonstrate their appreciation for renaissance art by tossing spare change into the sidewalk chalker's cigar box.*

While de Slob's series takes us toward the humming awareness a tourist might (doubtless should) bring to travel, Robideau packages "views" to carry away, perhaps the most venerable activity of the travel photographer. Robideau does take pictures of architectural promotions, but only those that have grown up to be landmarks and beloved by all who pass them in their cars. The automobile's angle of view, a matter of distances and geometries of approach, and the implied car motion of Robideau's assemblies are ways in which the artist inscribes travel into his pieces. The big game fish leaping out of the water and frozen in that jump on a platform, the fighter jet flashily tilted and framed to suggest it is swooping down, but frozen on another podium; Robideau's imagery emerges from travel, from the holiday pass by, to engage several crucial codes in the rhetoric of portability.

His works are three- and four-panel articulations of a single global image. The panels overlap perfectly and are set at cleverly designated

angles so that the discrete parts of each image seem capable of being folded over the others to form a neat packet; like one of those elaborate travel postcards that fold up like road maps. An aspect of the strong craft Robideau brings to his photography is the elegance of his alignments. The panels of each piece correspond exactly to the compositional elements of the image. A perfect panorama spreads out across the parts. A matter of angles, for each panel is a separate photo, and, consequently, together they enact an almost cinematic acceleration into the code of ellipsis in film: the dissolve. Almost. What Robideau holds back is the mark of temporal passage: the edges between the panels are sharply matched, yet each part of the image has been taken from a different position, hence at a different moment. The fact of the time difference is effaced so that what Robideau offers up is purely its result, the overlapped moments in a synchronous articulated space. It is a remarkable reconsideration of the panorama which is a series of photos pretending to be a continuous image, a single, atemporal view even if, absurdly, the panorama takes in a 360° space, which of course takes time.

Robideau, then, positions his photographs of landmarks across at least three types of codes in the rhetoric of portability: the travelogue still panorama (the code of the monumental in photography that carries the arena of the gaze away with it); the proto-cinematic code of ellipsis (an autobiographical, or at least authorial code, for the missing moments between the panels not only permit the picture to be articulated, they speak the presence and unseen activity of the artist/traveler between the moments of the seen when he moves from one camera position to another); and finally, the format code of portability (you just fold up the landmark and truck it off in your purse or rucksack).

This last, sad little significance of the format underlines the artist's choice of these particular landmarks which are, in a sense, abandoned. They serve no abiding public social function—they are not noble tombs or churches. They are precisely commercial architectural promotions and can possess only an ironic symbolism; like Robideau's giant Sudbury nickel (perhaps the most pathetic monument in all Canada) set by him on a blasted landscape, itself the product of the ecologically disastrous industry the big coin signifies. Moreover, Robideau selects landmarks that are usually baldly literal, like the game fish statue, and then opens up the space around them as an ideal backdrop. Here, the fish is set against an idyllic lake, as if it were a real, if ridiculously oversized fish.

Robideau shoots his photographs in subdued grays to bring up his landmarks' forlorn loneliness and the automotive distances isolate the monuments from congress with even the visitor, the artist himself. So they exist as signs for that agent of publicity, the camera; they exist for



Giant collection of miniature houses built by Nancy Linden adorns his front yard garden in downtown Vancouver, B.C. July 23, 1983. The sign reads: TAKE A LITTLE EXTRA TIME TO DAY TO STOP AND SMELL THE ROSES LONG THE WAY

*Grant Robertson 1984*



Street artists members of the Lower Mainland Art Society, Vancouver, B.C. are busy on Main Street near Union Avenue Station, March 21, 1983. Members of the group gather to demonstrate their appreciation for the muralist art by having signs hung into the sidewalk, rather than the street. *Grant Robertson 1983*

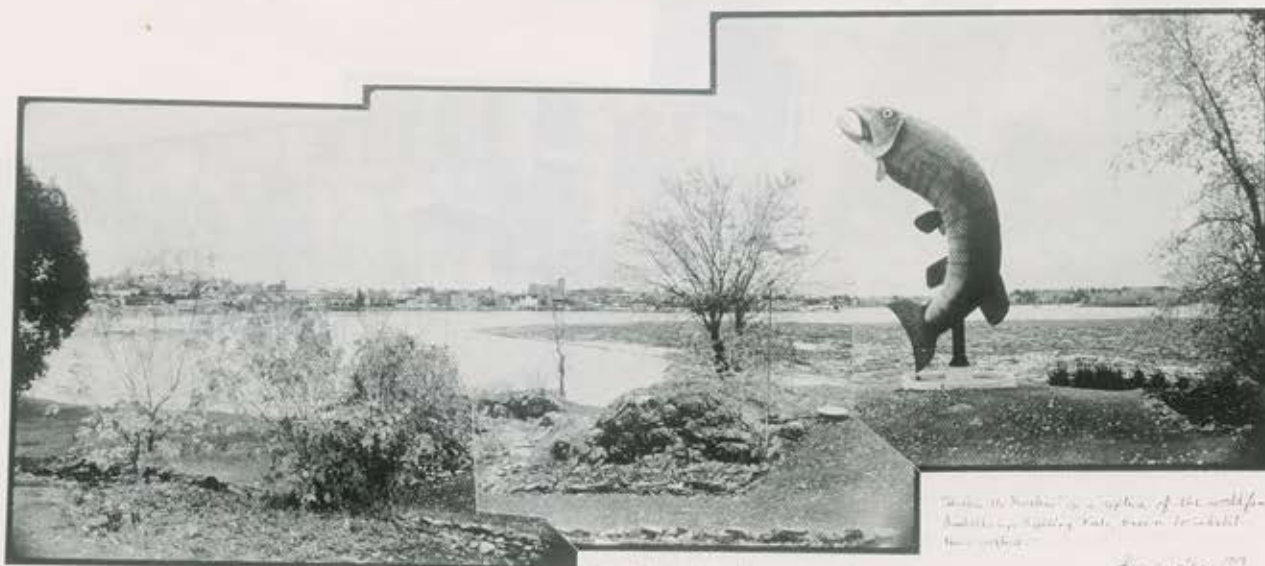


Giant Turtle and Turtle Hall of Fame, Boisservain, Manitoba,  
 home of the Canadian Turtle Derby, July 1987. *Henri Rodière*



Giant Turtle on a Boat Ride at the Western Development Museum, North Battleford, Saskatchewan, August 21, 1983.

*Henri Rodière 1983*



Thanks to the artist for a replica of the world-famous  
 Battle of the Fish, Battle of the Fish, Battle of the Fish,  
 Battle of the Fish.

*Henri Rodière 1983*

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their images to be taken away, and never gain a closer intimacy than that of a car driving by. The complex play of codes Robideau sets into motion with this fine series at once mobilizes and halts us around the viewing of the monumental, seen *en passant*, packed up and trucked off.

opposite page: Henri Robideau, 1984; caption reads *Giant Turtle and Turtle Hall of Fame, Bosservain, Manitoba, home of the Canadian Turtle Derby, July 1984.*

Henri Robideau, 1984; caption reads *Giant Mountie on a Giant Horse at the Western Development Museum, North Battleford, Saskatchewan, August 27, 1983.*

Henri Robideau, 1982; caption reads *Giant Muskie Fish, Kenora, Ontario, October 7, 1982.*

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Notes

1. On the origins and history of the explorer-traveler-artist, see Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), *passim*.

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