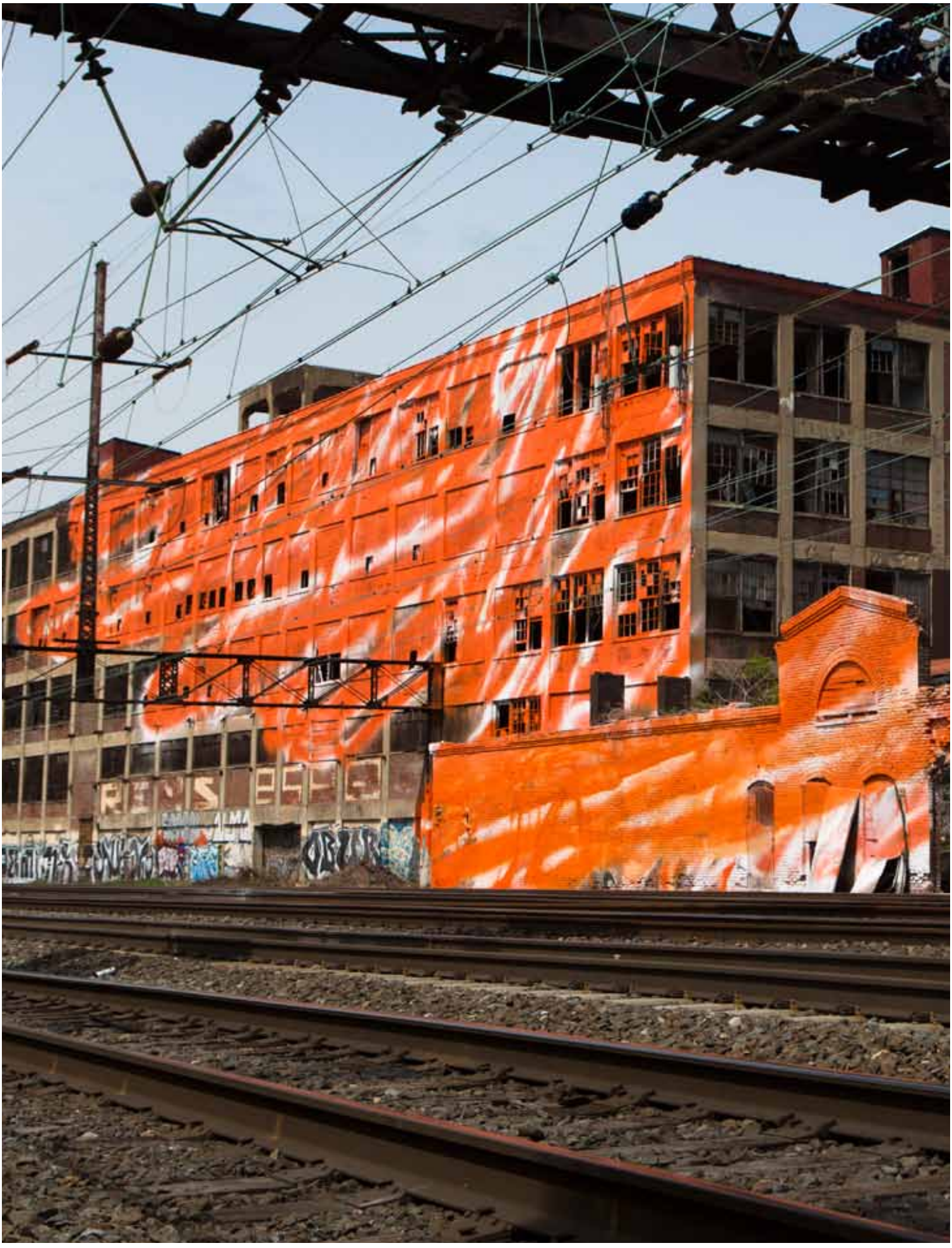

THE QUICK AND THE SLOW

Daniel Marcus

In early narrative accounts of rail travel, the breathtaking pace of steam trains—some twenty to thirty miles per hour—elicited as much terror as wonder prompting one observer to note, "[I]t is impossible to divest yourself of the notion of instant death to all upon the least accident happening."[1] Rail passengers not only feared accidents and crime en route, they also considered the phenomenology of rail travel to be a danger in its own right. An 1884 medical pamphlet lists the following pathologies of motorized perception:

> There is pulling at the eyeballs on looking out of the window; a jarring noise, the compound of continuous noise of wheels, and this conducted into the framework of the compartment; with the obbligato of whistle and of the brake dashing in occasionally, and always carrying some element of annoyance, surprise or shock; there is the swaying of the train from side to side, or the jolting over uneven rails and ill-adjusted points; and the general effect of these upon the temper, the muscles, and the moral nature [...] There are 'impressions' that are made, and that unavoidably, by the very conditions of the journey; and they involve fatigue. The eyes are strained, the ears are dinned, the

1 John Gore, ed., *The Creevy Papers* (New York: B.T. Batsford, Ltd., 1963), 256; quoted in Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1986), 15.

> muscles are jostled hither and thither, and the nerves are worried by the attempt to maintain order, and so comes weariness.[2]

Initially, the landscape perceived through the compartment window was a source of pain, not pleasure. "Pulling at the eyeballs," it tested the viewer's powers of attention, overtaxing the eye with ceaseless "impressions," a term that would have been understood literally, as the pressing or stamping of light on the retina. However, commentators soon began to discover in this optical barrage a source of enjoyment, and even a new genre of visual experience which historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch calls "panoramic vision." The railway spectator no longer struggled to perceive individual elements of the passing scenery; instead, she grew to savor the commingling of formerly discrete entities in an indistinctive flow. As one nineteenth-century traveler enthused, "Nothing by the way [of the train] requires study, or demands meditation, and though objects immediately at hand seem tearing wildly by, yet the distant fields and scattered trees, are not so bent on eluding observation, but dwell long enough in the eye to leave their undying impression."[3] Like a filmstrip, the railroad synthesized distinct spaces and environments into a continuous unity, all threaded together by the horizon's fluid line. Although objects in the foreground were beyond contemplation, flashing by too quickly to be seen, the spectator could easily follow the changing features of the background, which became a sort of meta- or second-order landscape—a whole distinct from its parts, and enjoyable as such.

2 Russell Reynolds, "Travelling: Its Influence on Health," in *The Book of Health,* ed. Malcolm Morris (London, Paris and New York: Cassell, 1884), 581; quoted in Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century,* 118.

3 Matthew E. Ward, *English Items; or, Microcosmic Views of England and Englishmen,* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1853), 47–8; quoted in Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the 19th Century,* 60.

Material evidence of "panoramic vision" can be traced back to nineteenth-century popular culture, which brimmed with simulated versions of high-speed spectacle. When, in 1896, the Lumière Brothers captured on film the final moments of a train's journey back to station, they unwittingly pioneered a new genre of cinema. Although the earliest experiments in railway cinematography favored the panoramic format, moviegoers came to prefer the so-called "phantom ride": film shot from the conductor's perspective, so that the camera appeared to be drifting autonomously along the tracks, unencumbered by its technological apparatus.[4] Prior to the advent of film, the train journey had been a popular theme of painted panoramas as well: For example, in 1834, visitors to the London *Padorama* could view a 10,000 square-foot strip of painted scenery, offering the view as seen from the newly built Liverpool and Manchester line.[5]

Schivelbusch is keen to emphasize the generational assimilation of railway phenomenology: By his reckoning, those passengers who grew up traveling by train, or who experienced rail travel via popular simulations, had been able to enjoy panoramically what their predecessors had not. Yet in their details, the artifacts of railway culture point to the difficulty, and even impossibility, of fully synthesizing a new landscape from the old. For instance, in the brochure accompanying the 1834 *Padorama* exhibition, we discover that much of the scenery—"the dull portions of the road"—was omitted by the artists; for "[t]o have given an uninterrupted continuous representation would have occupied too great a space, and would besides have been uninteresting to the Public."[6] No such aesthetic alteration

4 See Patrick Keiller, "Phantom Rides: The Railway and Early Film," in *The Railway and Modernity: Time, Space, and the Machine Ensemble,* eds. Matthew Beaumont and Michael Freeman (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 70–4. For a related discussion of the cinema/railway dyad, see Tom Gunning, "Landscape and the Fantasy of Moving Pictures: Early Cinema's Phantom Rides," in *Cinema and Landscape,* eds. Graeme Harper and Jonathan R. Rayner, (Chicago: Intellect, The University of Chicago Press, 2010).

5 Stephan Oetterman, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium* (New York: Zone Books, 1997, cited in Keiller, op. cit., 69–70.

6 *Descriptive catalogue of the Padorama of the Manchester and Liverpool Rail-road,... now exhibiting at Baker Street, etc.* (London: Liverpool and Manchester Railway, 1834), 8.

was possible in real life, however: The in-person journey between Manchester and Liverpool would have been far duller than its simulation. Likewise, in the Lumière Brothers' *Panorama of a Train Arriving at Aix-les-Bains* (1896), the abrupt succession of objects and spaces far and near, from a river to a bridge to an advertisement to the façade of an apartment building, interrupts and fragments the panoramic view; again and again, the eye is drawn to the fleeting foreground. Both examples suggest that the panorama was first and foremost a *curated* landscape, with occasional picturesque views punctuating an otherwise null field of vision. Inevitably, some portion of the landscape—indeed, the vast majority—ends up lost to view, and the passenger has no choice but to take this in stride, experiencing the lacuna not as privation, but as a kind of plenitude.

The railroad altered the ecology of the visible world, not only for passengers, but for pedestrians as well. Whereas the railway passenger loses sight of the foreground, the reverse is true of the pedestrian, for whom the *background*—where the immediate sphere of vision meets with, and is qualified by the distant line of horizon—is simultaneously stolen and multiplied by the expansion of transportation infrastructure (including utilities such as electricity, water, telephony, etc.). Stolen, insofar as the layering of speedways blocks access to the horizon, rendering it unapproachable on foot; multiplied, since this flow-space of high-speed traffic effectively replicates the horizon's signature effect: its horizontality. For the pedestrian, even the least trafficked roads and railways bring the far edge of the earth terrifyingly close, buttressed by just a few feet of sidewalk or gravel. As

paved roads and power lines come to dominate the human environment, the background of the pedestrian world becomes increasingly isolated, to the point that the distance between near and far is no longer mediated. The burden of optical concentration falls less to the quick than to the slow, those who, foot-bound, are compelled to see things that were never meant to be looked at in any detail: tracks, roads, telephone wires, retaining walls, highway underpasses, etc. For many subjects of the contemporary metropolis, the pathways of high-speed transportation amount to a visual blind spot, offering little other information than the raw fact of an *elsewhere* from which the near world has been excluded.[7]

Pictorial art plays an insurgent role in this partitioning of the quick from the slow. Graffiti writing, which evolved in close relation to the decay of urban transportation systems, is more than a mere countercultural expression: In the tags, throw-ups, and full-scale pieces that make up the lexicon of contemporary graffiti, the components of abstract painting and modernist typography are deployed in such a way as to widen the rift—technological as well as economic—separating passengers from the landscape. Politically, graffiti intervenes on behalf of the pedestrian class, serving an implicit warning to passengers: Unless mobility is universal, it is only a privilege, not a source of freedom. Modernism once made a similar claim: "Follow me, comrade aviators!" urged Kasimir Malevich in 1919, as the still-nascent Russian Revolution lurched toward full mobilization, proffering mass liberation in terms of mass *acceleration*.[8] By the end of the century, however, the slogans had changed: In New York City of the 1980s, the avant-garde imperative was to

7 For a synthesis of relevant statistical research on mobility and employment since 1960, see Susan Hanson, "The Context of Urban Travel: Concepts and Recent Trends," in Susan Hanson and Genevieve Giuliano, eds., *The Geography of Urban Transportation (Third Edition),* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2004).

8 This discussion of the politics of speed owes much to the work of Paul Virilio; see in particular *Speed and Politics,* trans. Mark Polizzotti (Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2006); originally published as *Vitesse et Politique* (Paris: Édition Galilée, 1977). For a compendium of more recent debates on acceleration and modernity, see Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, eds., *#ACCELERATE: The Accelerationist Reader,* (London: Urbanomic, 2014).

"bomb the system" and to "destroy all lines," waging a war of painted pseudonyms that promised, at least in theory, to force the mass-transit system to a halt.[9] A continuous thread connects Malevich's moment with the deindustrialized modernity of the late twentieth century: Then as now, capitalism and mobility are inseparable, although the growth of the former has done little to universalize the latter. Whereas industrialization put engines at the service of the masses, deindustrialization appears to have reneged on this promise; in the decentralized, and increasingly suburban, landscape of post-industrial labor, the rise of Uber, Lyft, and similar travesties of "shared" mobility has downgraded (but upmarketed) speed from communal resource to private commodity. As demand for transportation rises, mobility seems poised to become a privilege rather than a right—a shift epitomized by Elon Musk's proposed "hyperloop" hydraulic tunnel, the ultimate vision of a post-pedestrian world.

Where should *psychylustro* be situated in this matrix of speed and vision? In a press statement, Grosse speaks of *psychylustro* in terms not far removed from the rhetoric of urban beautification, claiming that painting enables her to "get close to people, to stir up a sense of life experience and heighten their sense of presence."[10] It would be reasonable to wonder whether these ambitions amount to beautification—visual neurasthenia for the world-weary commuter. If not this, then what kind of "life experience" does *psychylustro* afford?

For my part, I doubt that we can take any claims about beauty at face value. There are few conventional definitions of the beautiful that would accommodate Grosse's installation. Her choice of colors—a garish palette of

9 This was an ambiguous gesture: "bombers" of the Manhattan subway system were effectively attacking a venerable proletarian institution (rather than, say, defacing private taxis and limousines), yet their gesture was crucial in rallying attention to the defunding of public infrastructure in a city struggling to recover from bankruptcy.

10 Katharina Grosse, quoted in the Mural Arts press release for *psychylustro*. *http://muralarts.org/katharinagrosse*.

fluorescent green, pink, and orange, closer to the stuff of Ghostbusters than to Matisse or Monet—seems calculated to startle the eye, if not to offend it outright. Despite precautions that its component materials will degrade safely and responsibly, *psychylustro* calls to mind scenes of environmental catastrophe or chemical warfare without conforming to any clear-cut allegory of decay and reanimation. The work neither beautifies North Philadelphia nor brands it as a disaster area; but what *is* the point then?

To get close to people, to stir up a sense of life experience, to heighten the viewer's sense of presence—these objectives could easily have been lifted from the instruction manual of the 1834 *Padorama*. As it turns out, however, the phrase "to get close" means something quite specific, if counterintuitive, in Grosse's lexicon. Closeness usually implies proximity, but for Grosse, the ultimate form of closeness is *theatrical*: not physical nearness, but the projection of attention beyond the bounds of the self, into the realm of someone else's subjectivity. To become truly close with someone, she argues, we must be able to believe that we *are* that person—as Grosse puts it, "Watching life on stage gets you away from identifying with your social persona. When I understood how to *not* identify with my work I felt very free and powerful."[11] Defined this way, closeness has more to do with communion than contact. This goes for Grosse's method of painting as well, which suppresses the sense of touch in favor of pure, disembodied vision: "I use the space and the surface but I don't touch it, feel it, and fetishize it. I'm quite detached from it because of my mask and protective clothing. I watch myself doing it. I see the paint hitting the wall in front

11 Katharina Grosse interviewed by Ati Maier, *BOMB Magazine* no. 115 (Spring 2011), http://bombmagazine.org/article/4910/katharina-grosse.

of me; the implement [i.e. a spray gun] does not obscure it, as with a paintbrush."[12]

Like many modernists—and many more panorama painters—before her, Grosse aligns freedom with vision: To be free, she argues, is to escape the tactile, spatial enclosures of the pedestrian world. Few contemporary city dwellers would disagree with her. As the speed/vision system expands, freedom becomes rewritten in terms of the velocity of self-estrangement: Emancipation, once a category of personal and spatial autonomy, now means liberty *from* the physical here-and-now—not to *be* autonomous, but to *access* the autonomous circuitry of rapid, and even instantaneous, transportation (whether vehicular or electronic). In this sense, *psychylustro* can be interpreted as a test case for the realization, even if only locally and temporarily, of modernism's dream of universal speed, forging a communion of liberated souls from the constituencies of Amtrak and SEPTA.

Optimism, although a strong note, is not *psychylustro*'s only note. Far from bathing the spectator in a continuous experiential landscape, as with the *Padorama, psychylustro* punctuates the post-industrial scenery sporadically and unexpectedly. During the eight- to ten-minute trip between 30th Street Station and North Philadelphia, the viewer scans the foreground in search of the next painted site, until suddenly, without transition, the color field flashes into view. Throughout the journey, various species of graffiti compete for the rider's attention, from serial tags to unique wall-sized pieces, some made by locals, others by regional notables like SKREW, NEKST, and SIRE.

12 Katharina Grosse interviewed by Louise Neri, "Painting in the Expanded Field," in *Antipodes: Inside the White Cube,* London: White Cube, 2003. URL

Although Grosse makes a point of sharing the rail corridor with graffiti writers, she expresses the difference between her use of spray paint and theirs in no uncertain terms:

> I don't mark areas ... signifying that [this or that place is] mine. Graffiti is actually marking possessions, making claims on certain areas, saying, "If you go into that area you are actually trespassing," whereas my work is very much about the opposite: about inviting people to trespass, and the freedom that is implied with that activity.[13]

This passage might suggest a disagreement between Grosse and the writer community, yet I am inclined to group them together, as two halves of a divided whole. Graffiti cuts short modernism's dream of visual trespass, summoning the spectator back to the here-and-now, and to the dismal business of possession and dispossession. Nevertheless, Grosse insists on the dream's necessity: Although painting cannot remove the partition between *here* and *there* (the pedestrian's world versus the circuitry of the speed-enhanced), it can at least make this partition visible, showing us the limits to freedom—urging us onward. In this sense, *psychylustro* operates parallel with the Lumières' panoramic train films, but perpendicular to the *Padorama*: Rather than erase the image of the slow world, synthesizing passenger and landscape by fiat, Grosse puts the divided halves side by side, letting the broken be broken, letting us see it that way.

13 Video interview with Katharina Grosse on the occasion of her exhibition, *Hello Little Butterfly I Love You What's Your Name?* at ARKEN Museum of Modern Art, Copenhagen, Denmark. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJkSs5EQ7nk. Uploaded December 10, 2009.