



# **BACK TO THE FUTURE**

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**M**y son is into vehicles. Being two, and being impractical (redundant as well as causal, I realize as I type), he recently asked me why cars don't fly. I'm not sure if he has been pondering this would-be pragmatic solution to Los Angeles traffic as I circumnavigate the city, silently praying to a god I don't believe in but am superstitious enough to invoke. As it happened, he posed the question while lying on the rainbow checkerboard of his playroom floor, while his hand drew infinity signs in the air with a fire engine the size of an eraser. I nostalgically pondered my own childhood, and more specifically, the future-oriented Jetsons—those picture phones *exist!*—whose world of far-away galaxies and jerry-rigged machines seemed improbably fun. And then I couldn't stop thinking about *Back to the Future*. The movie stayed with me until that night. What was it about? I couldn't really remember the finer points of the story, just the primary element of time-travel and the protagonist's desperation in trying to return to the right place along the endless sweep.

Wikipedia was helpful, mostly in revealing the wildly literal Oedipal plot point that I clearly had repressed. More interesting though was what maybe everyone knows, yet I didn't: The writers, Robert Zemeckis and Bob Gale, drafted the script after Gale speculated whether he and his father would have been friends had they gone to school together as boys. I cannot say as regards to my own parents how this might have played out. I like to imagine we would have been close, though this is anyone's guess. It is an impossible heuristic to which perhaps only recourse to sci-fi might do.

Just the other night, as she was falling asleep, my daughter wondered aloud whether she or I would die first. The thought is unbearable and I set it aside. I would also like to believe that we would have been friends, as we are now, back then, or that we could have been in her future, still to come. Time is unforgiving in its rigidity and incompatibility but also capacious enough to put such

otherwise incommensurate worlds into proximity. It is difficult for both of my kids to conceive of why my son will in all likelihood grow to be taller than my daughter, despite her always—F.O.R.E.V.E.R., as she is given to saying, emphatically, as a wondrous temporal cognate to numeric infinity—being almost three years older.

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Like flying cars, time travel is ostensibly the stuff of childhood, of comparatively pre-cognitive ideation unchecked by the very real exigencies of the world suffered so unceremoniously by grown-ups. These themes are mainstays in children's literature alongside stories of little-people's alter-egos traveling to foreign lands or meeting fantastic creatures who are as actual, as sensibly tangible, as the ground on which they stand (unless they, too, are lucky enough to alight by wing or be spirited by supernatural power through kingdoms and clouds and dreamscapes). Yet the adage that childhood is wasted on the young applies here, for they have no conception of why this is so miraculous, so requiring of the willful suspensions of disbelief that prove their greatest seductions. And when uttered by an adult, the notion of time travel, much less encountering aliens—imaginary friends, of a sort—in one's own moment, is sheer lunacy. This despite the fact that appeals to other impossible possibilities admit a more common desire, whether for introspection or escape.

A classic Cold War instance of the latter is *When Prophecy Fails* (1956), a study of cognitive dissonance authored by Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter.<sup>1</sup> They take as a case study a voluble housewife, Mrs. Marian Keech, who roused a group of sympathetic believers to make high-stakes changes of occupations,

relationships, and lifestyles in preparation for an end that she understood to be imminent based on passages of automatic writing channeled from extra-terrestrials. She maintained that she had received communication from the planet “Clarion” portending the world’s destruction. It goes without saying that neither the flood nor the wished-for flying saucer ever visited her Chicago suburb. There was no one-way ticket just yet. But the consequences for Keech were real enough. It matters that she believed in this scenario and was willing to act on this belief—irrespective of the fact that her conviction persisted in the face of evidence to the contrary. Nonetheless, such magical thinking necessarily remains a symptom not its cure.

We move forward with an exhausting relentlessness, grateful that this inviolable condition still obtains. It is better than the alternative, flying-saucer scenarios notwithstanding. Parallax might become a theoretical proposition, unmaking a linear rigidity. Humanists go back to the future from research subjects as a matter of course. Is this compensatory?

John McCracken famously described his iconic vertical planks leaning against the supporting architecture as vehicles to the beyond. This was laughable, reducible on the part of so many critics, especially after his death in 2011, to his being a new-agey-Californian.<sup>2</sup> His studio epiphany betrays nothing of the sort: He saw a piece of wood resting casually against the wall while awaiting deployment, poised between the floor-bound prop of sculpture and the wall-oriented portal of painting. He coated a slender stick of plywood with layers of fiberglass and resin and, presto, a colored plank that mirrored the room on its glossy surface. Had McCracken kept the narrative there, instead of frequently and increasingly insistently talking about ghosts, UFO and spacecraft, and the pliable nature of time—one exemplary piece remains a *Frieze* feature replete with iterative sketches of Martians<sup>3</sup> —he might not have been separated out from

his peers. As it happens, he was held apart from the New York cohort whom he imagined as his interlocutors, but also his fellow Southlanders, who more benignly could be understood to reflect the here and now. Their sun-drenched surroundings appeared in bright, shiny offerings that suggested the glint of hot-rods peacocking along the Pacific. McCracken first conceived of his planks in 1966, the same year that *Star Trek* debuted as an intergalactic Western, but already the year before, McCracken was writing in his notebooks of life forms from elsewhere. He was imagining them communicating, moving through him to generate composition. Then he started talking.

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In the catalog attending his 1969 solo show at the Art Gallery of Ontario, McCracken was quoted from 1968, admitting: “I have what amounts to a psychic ability; the critical point in my conceiving process is when I do direct mental visualization in search of the forms or things which are simply and obviously right. And like the psychic’s ‘gift,’ it resists intellectual dissection, and goes away when the attempt is made to gain that kind of control over it.”<sup>4</sup> In an interview with Frances Colpitt three decades on, he asked: “Do you remember the first Superman movie, when Superman takes his girlfriend’s hand and they go flying? She stays in the air as long as they’re touching—as long as she’s in contact with the idea. In a similar way, if I can make a sculpture that presents a sort of transcendent possibility, it may make it easier for someone who sees it to achieve it.”<sup>5</sup>

McCracken in some instances left process behind to more directly address extra-terrestrial life. Peter Clothier published two articles on McCracken’s interest in UFOs and his experiences with those driving them, and his

belief in intelligence out beyond the nearest stars. In an *Art Monthly* piece dubbed “UFO Technology” he said: “I often think in metaphorical terms of making sculptures that appear to have been left here by an UFO, by beings from another and more developed dimension or world or place in time.”<sup>6</sup> This was something of a leitmotif, the notion of producing work that would appear as if returned from the future, or had been deposited in its current site by the proverbial little green men. Given all of this, it is little wonder that it was commonly assumed that McCracken had designed the black-slab monolith featured in Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*, although he did not.

McCracken held forth that he saw his grandfather’s ghost at 7 or 8, and time-traveled at 17 when gazing in the sky near Mt. Shasta. “As I looked toward the sunset over the western mountains, a feeling came over me. I felt I was being watched by someone or something behind me, in the sky. . . .Then about fifteen years later, in 1966-67, in my studio in Venice, California, I was thinking and musing one evening and happened to remember my earlier experience of being watched. . . .And then like a brick it hit me: I was seeing that scene *from the same point in the sky where I had earlier felt I was being watched*. . . .There had been someone watching me then, and it was *me, from the future!*”<sup>7</sup>

Thus did McCracken paradoxically arrive at the basic tenets of the minimalist creed as Michael Fried characterized them. For Fried, minimal sculptures exert a “silent presence” that importantly struck him as being akin to the crowding of one’s perimeter by “another person.” In a near paranoiac turn, he goes so far as to compare his experience of these artworks to coming across something — someone — in a darkened room, where it has been lying in wait, underscoring his charge of anthropomorphism latent in the cubes and lattices so contingent on the perceiving subject to constitute them through the reciprocity of address.<sup>8</sup> Still, McCracken’s formulation differs in one fundamental regard: his sculptures are not

surrogate people but aliens, or the equally remote version of himself, coming forward, coming back, across the chasm of decades. He finally eschewed metaphors for realism. No representation this, but functional abstraction.

McCracken’s mid-career show at P.S. 1 in New York in 1986 was titled “Heroic Stance: The Sculpture of John McCracken 1965-1986.” It installed McCracken at the center of a universe, maybe only of his own making, but it chafes anyhow. If he at some moments felt himself to be an intermediary, he was never a steward, but a transitory, mortal vessel for a precarious achievement. His works, for all their superficial optimism, admit the smallness of this one man and presage a world in which his works will be, already have become, pre-lapsarian relics.

He never lived to witness a project that Creative Time sponsored in 2012, Trevor Paglen’s *The Last Pictures*. It is a high-tech message in a bottle for which Paglen selected emblematic images of cultural patrimony and set them into space amidst satellites in geosynchronous orbit. Paglen worked with materials scientists at Massachusetts Institute of Technology to develop an archival disc, micro-etched with one hundred photographs and encased in a gold-plated shell. In Fall 2012, the communications satellite EchoStar XVI launched with the disc mounted to its anti-earth deck. As the press release frames: “While the satellite’s broadcast images are as fleeting as the light-speed radio waves they travel on, *The Last Pictures* will remain in outer space slowly circling the Earth until the Earth itself is no more.”<sup>9</sup>

*The Last Pictures* assumes not human but geological time — it could exist for billions of years — and interpolates a posterity that may well never receive it. In this, it is situated against the sanguinity of Carl Sagan’s *Golden Record*, 1977, in which Sagan sent information of our species into space aboard the Voyager spacecraft.<sup>10</sup> (On September 12, 2013, NASA announced that Voyager 1 left our Solar System and entered interstellar space.) Paglen’s images of nuclear bombs and internment camps convey

a very different sentiment about our prospects than did Sagan's natural sounds and greetings in dozens of ancient and modern languages. In his curatorial statement, Nato Thompson characterizes it as "courageous, optimistic, humane, and lacking in noticeable doubt. *The Last Pictures*, on the other hand, is a voyage into space tinged with the kind of doubt reserved for a society unaware of just how tenuous it truly is."<sup>11</sup> He furthers, documenting a stunning reversal: "In the tradition of astronomy, Paglen makes a basic shift. While we used to look into the heavens for evidence of the gods, now we see the forensics of ourselves."<sup>12</sup>

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Maybe we have for too long seen McCracken as a Sagan when he is in fact a Paglen. Or better, maybe he was a Paglen wishing to be a Sagan, against his better judgment. Failure is equally, if differently, inscribed into the prophetic moment of each. Time travel, by which I mean an awareness of life that has come before—an awareness *that* life has come before—is meaningful at the moment of its articulation. What happens next is beyond us. It belongs to someone else, or to no one. I write this with the image of Samuel Adams and Paul Revere's 1795 time capsule firmly in mind. Anointed symbols of patriotism, they offered a promissory note to the new American republic in the form of already-historic coins and the seal of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; I witnessed these trinkets being exhumed while at the gym, bobbing on a treadmill.

My mother wrote a diary chronicling my life from the day I was born until I left for college. I always marveled at the dedication, the love hours that could never be repaid, as Mike Kelley put it in describing a mode of sentimentality that is really a gaping maw of pain. Each August, I would

get to shop for a new journal for the coming year and it was my task to illustrate the family portrait that now adorns its frontispiece. Everything else was left to my mother. I have fond memories of her scrawling in the little books. All 18 sit in a closet in her guest room, neatly stacked like bars of soap anticipating use. They contain anecdotes that might verify or disprove family lore. I know I devoured broccoli spears, holding them like lollipops; at an unlikely age I was strong enough to move furniture into more favorable dispositions; I christened a favorite brown-haired doll after a friend named Nicole. Then came the divorce, new houses, a dog, another dog, a wonky, well-attended marriage ceremony for the dogs, another house, new friends, classes in jewelry making and landscape painting, and the usual stuff of adolescence. I suppose I imagine the writings to chronicle the global banalities of childhood and the idiosyncrasies that were my and my family's own.

While I intend to read the entries, beginning to end, I have not and cannot bring myself to do so. I long thought that this owed to some kind of preemptive sadness about the losses it confirms, as well as those it portends. For the texts no doubt achieve a portrait of my mother as much as they fashion one of me. What interested, frustrated, or pleased her? What did she deem worthy of mention on days when no event worth remembering happened? What minutia did she record? How did she fill pages or confine an excess of meaning to the same allotted margins? I will have in this something of her, shared with me alone. Only now do I acknowledge that she has been an alibi. I know that she liked me, that she loved me, that she dutifully recorded this longing so that I could keep it close. One day, maybe soon, I will follow these stories of a life I think I recognize and come to discover whether I would have liked myself.

## Endnotes

1. Leon Festinger, Henry Riecken, and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (1956; New York: Harper & Row, 1964).
2. To cite just one: Roberta Smith began her coverage for the *New York Times* by placing McCracken as “a West Coast artist who brought a New Age openness to Minimalist sculpture, along with a vocabulary of bright, sleek slabs, blocks and columns that balanced teasingly between painting and sculpture.” She further described him as “a tall, lanky man who in photographs resembled a cross between Clint Eastwood and Jack Palance [who] approached Minimalism—known for its literal-mindedness, industrial fabrication and resistance to interpretation—with a sense of play, craft and spirituality that was distinctly his own while also reflecting his California roots.” See: [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/11/arts/design/john-mccracken-sculptor-of-geometric-forms-dies-at-76.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/11/arts/design/john-mccracken-sculptor-of-geometric-forms-dies-at-76.html?_r=0)
3. John McCracken, “Remote Viewing/Psychic Traveling; March-April 1997,” *Frieze* (June-August 1997): 60-63.
4. John McCracken in James Monte, *John McCracken: Sculpture 1965-69* (Toronto: The Art Gallery of Ontario, 1969) np.
5. John McCracken in Frances Colpitt, “Between Two Worlds,” *Art in America* (April 1998): 90.
6. John McCracken in Patricia Bickers, “UFO Technology,” *Art Monthly* (March 1997): 4
7. John McCracken in “Interview: John McCracken and Matthew Higgs,” *Early Sculpture/JohnMcCracken* (New York: Zwirner & Wirth, 2005): 4-5. He continues: “As to frontiers, that experience hints at one: inner reality. Physical reality is big, but inner reality, though slippery, is bigger—and it permits time travel, as does the mind.”
8. Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood” (1967), in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998): 148–72.
9. <http://creativetime.org/projects/the-last-pictures/>
10. Trevor Paglen, “Friends of Space, How Are You All? Have You Eaten Yet? Or, Why Talk to Aliens Even if We Can’t,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* (Spring 2013): 8-19.
11. <http://creativetime.org/projects/the-last-pictures/curatorial-statement/>
12. *Ibid.*