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EDITORIAL EQUITABLE ACTIONS

Creators are always the first to tackle the touchiest subjects. They integrate or assimilate, and react in a flash. Environmental concerns have inspired artistic projects for at least four decades, and present-day art is addressing them more and more. This issue includes our second ecology-related feature in a year abounding with projects in which culture and nature overlap, and that take action against a backdrop of extreme urgency.

"An artist's gesture in the landscape." These are the bucolic terms chosen by Francine Larivée to describe the vast ecological intervention that she has been working on along the Lachine Canal, in the Montreal area, since 2001. Titled "After the passage of trains, urban landscape action: care and seeding," this project echoes the mnesic traces of a former switching yard and its tracks located north of St. Patrick Street. It involves massively seeding the terrain with various types of plants that absorb contaminants (traces of heavy metals) and transplanting a profusion of trees. The artist's mission is one of phytoremediation that consists of nothing less than restoring the site's ecosystem.

Working with the City of Montreal's Environment Laboratory and Botanical Gardens, the artist has formally and symbolically reconstituted the tracks, which are buried 50 centimetres below ground. The plants she has sown grow in cameos of greens and ochres, reproducing the rail lines on the surface. In addition, the trails once used by rail workers have been updated to form furrowlike footpaths of white gravel. Caring for land and memory, says Larivée, helps to "heal the buried traces of an industrial history ... while re-forging ties with agriculture and with the cultivation of soil and treatment of its components."

In the space of a gallery that shows large-scale projects other than outdoor work, Maude Léonard-Contant is exhibiting Surtout ne prends pas froid. She has recreated a fragment of forest where the assembled trees, which look real, are the deceptive actors in an incongruous, or tragic, play.

In this place of metaphor for what remains of our trees – our birches, abundant inhabitants of the boreal forest – we are confronted with voids in the bodies of tree. Nearby, bundled logs, the cutaway sections, remind us of the cultural solutions that humans have found to mask their failed duty towards nature, to which we are complicit witnesses. The artist uses paper, pencil and charcoal to recreate the white, grey and black birchbark. This is another ruse, an attempt to make us forget the fact that there are not enough trees left to cover with our words. Or distress.

Elsewhere, Naledi Jackson merges culture and nature in a pictorial work. This is a strange piece, because it presents what appears to be a cultural impossibility: grass growing on a painting. The term tableau vivant finds its literal meaning here, or at least a new one. This picture – its "plant" part, that is, the unpainted area – requires regular watering and tending. The two parts must cohabitate, or one will destroy the other.

In a related vein, I want to share my thoughts on a hoped-for ecology of an intellectual nature. On a recent trip to deliver a lecture at the Centre d'exposition de Val-d'Or, I discovered that Abitibi-Témiscamingue apparently has no writer tasked with explaining the art of its region. This was confirmed to me by everyone I met from the cultural field. I also learned that Université du Québec à Rouyn-Noranda offers courses in art and multimedia but has no art history program. How can this be? The consequence, of course, is that the region is in trouble. It is missing a crucial link in its visual arts chain and has few resources to question and bring to public notice the art produced there. Therefore, I am calling on the region's educational institutions to restore the teaching of art history, to take equitable and responsible action. For without art history, there can be no art.

Isabelle Lelarge
Translation by Marcia Couëlle

NEWS/ANALYSIS

ECOLOGY (2)

NATURE AS MODEL OF PLACE

A report on the ecological and environmental questions raised by a dozen artists in works exhibited in Montreal galleries, museums or artist-run centres in fall/winter 2006. And on how they query the relationships between society and social space in the early 21st century, where the landscape is marked by sweeping urbanization. With humankind in crisis over such changes and upheavals, these artists deploy keenly lucid visions to spur us to a clearer perception of our world.

Take Denis Farley. His photographs closely echo the analysis of urbanists and sociologists who talk about a two-way movement in which, paradoxically, urbanization impacts the countryside and ruralization affects urban space. Creeping in from the outskirts, a certain way of shaping nature typical of North American suburbia is making a comeback in our cities. With the polyptychs shown in conjunction with work by Lynne Cohen in an exhibition titled *Access Points-Points d'Accès* (Parisian Laundry, January 11-February 25), Farley puts a tear in some of the social and spatial filters that hem nature in.

Many of these images provide a glimpse of interior green spaces, artificial landscapes installed in the lobbies of office buildings. Like a signal, a concentrated mass of ornamental plants marks the transition between public space and private space. Here, giant bamboos grow in pots, at odds with the polished marble floor. Elsewhere, caged palm trees shoot skyward in halls or atriums. In another piece, an image of a star-studded night sky is juxtaposed with the glass and metal of a wall/screen, hard up against the building's angular tyranny. One photograph of an aimlessly floating birch tree trunk is wedged between pictures of concrete halls. Beyond brutalizing volumes, budding branches form an organic network alongside the glass cladding of an exterior wall. Farley interrogates the thinking that incorporates indoor gardens into the architectural density based on a discordant and ostentatious architectural trope deriving from stereotypes of well-to-do suburbs. *Displacements* – as the works are titled – form tensions, evident in the radiant images of business centres where architecture is wielded like advertising rhetoric. They convey discreet, tranquil horror without pathos. The "cosmetic" aspect, the banality and the conditioning of these standardized, hybrid green/administrative spaces are submerged in a shared bath of business, "global realities" and globalization.

Farley's lens occasionally focuses on people at the lower reaches of buildings. His querying of people's relationship to their environment is often rendered through an isolated figure. The tiny presences are seemingly crushed, and their status is far from clear. The figures do not appear to be authorized users but, rather, undesirable, intruders. Think of the furtive smokers, relegated to quasi-clandestinity, huddled around office buildings under the social pressure of political correctness that discourages a practice now deemed dangerously deviant. "Unknown status," "homeless," "welfare case" – as if denatured by technocratic qualifications that make them worthless, undesignated and unsocialized, the denizens of Farley's photos are part of a strategy that cleanses all nastiness from the relationships of human exploitation it tends to gloss over. These figures appear to be cornered, lying or squatting by a wall in idleness that guiltily contrasts with the surrounding productivity glorified by architecture. The environment could subject the bodies to neo-capitalism turned green and sports-minded, moulding them to new uses, to the tyranny of mobility, of well-being and health. And in so doing, totally dedicate them to economic and commercial exchange.

The reality of our cities is now shaped by office developments desperately begging to be rented, emptied of activities relocated to the science parks of emerging countries where the workforce offers capital the dual

advantage of greater competence and cheaper salaries. Forecast profits and the promise of dividends combine to create vacancies in the carpeted, landscaped buildings with depersonalized halls. Despite ups and downs for promoters, the real estate market is replacing the city with a succession of operations platforms, multi-purpose sites and curtain-walled structures housing tertiary activities. Their soulless jewel-box qualities are apparently meant to make us forget the precariousness of placeless contemporary jobs doomed to be relocated sooner or later. In Farley's polyptychs, the anonymous desolation of the spaces is juxtaposed with ghostly references to a "naturalizing nature" fired with biological urge that conveys evidence of a desire to subvert. The panels devoted solely to the plant world attest the same dissociation. Another series of photographic works titled *Greenhouse Effects* (Graff, February 1-March 10) is similarly collagelike, but here Farley portrays vast spaces. In the pictured greenhouses, nature appears to be entirely mechanized. Oddly, though, the ambiguously contrasting vision of nature as a timeless reservoir of primal images persists. This fascination with things virgin and primordial overlies the visual and can also be read as laying claim to the world in all its incoherence. Independent of any transgenic deviance, the point is to apprehend the evolving future of nature while reality wraps itself in a distorting network of images and shimmers. With this capacity to go back to the roots, Farley's work awakens primary sensations that are the vectors of a disalienating time-out to piece back together the bits of the proposed puzzle.

Melding history and living environment, Geneviève Chevalier revisited the past of Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, a venerable Montreal neighbourhood that was originally a farming village. At once accusatory and nostalgic, her device substituted wavering bucolic images for the stark present – the urban highway seen through a panoramic window at the Maison de la Culture Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (*Tomber en pâmes*, January 19-March 4). In this installation-sculpture, something appears to collapse in the shade of an apple tree's gnarled branches. As if seized by a tentacular flood, the white plaster walls seem to explode. Plaster fruits roll on the ground while, before our eyes, thousands of cars travel the trenchlike Decarie Expressway, whose presence thwarts the continuity of places that once surrounded the city. The other component of the work is composed of diagonally sloping planes suggesting walls or fences. The resulting passage frames a shattered table. Huge moulded-plaster melons strew the floor alongside shards of broken plates. Associated with the idea of shock and breakage, but also of feasting under the trees, the melons allude to the market gardens that blanketed the neighbourhood in the early 20th century. A reference to architecture is provided by a few photos of surviving century-old houses designed for village or rural life that sit uneasily in the rigid grid of contemporary streets, seeming to vanish from the urban fabric. Bearing witness to an idyllic vision of an agrarian way of life now obscured by galloping urbanization, visions otherwise buried in the interstices of urban memory re-emerge.

Chevalier draws on history to visually convey the milestone nature of these landmarks that express the race of time. And the installation leverages history to take us back to the rift between rural and urban, to a questioning of our lost contact with nature. Through its fragmentary components, the here and now is compressed with surfacing memory.

Last summer, *Tree House*, at the Liane and Danny Taran Gallery, conjured up childhood memories of constructions built by, or at least for, children. Atypical and non-standard, the tree house is the most rudimentary form of dwelling. Here it became a Bachelardian fantasy. With widely varying maquettes – some buildable, others downright unfeasible – landscape artists, architects and visual artists proposed an overview of this theme.

Reminiscent of Penone and Arte Povera, Rachel Echenberg and Sébastien Worsnip's boats anchored in the branches invited solo navigation on high. Naomi London added padded seats along the stem of her branch. For *Caprice*, Jacques Bilodeau imagined a graftlike cocoon of black material that enveloped his branch; at once nest

and sculpture, this "architect-less architecture" might have been nature's creation. Michael Robinson incorporated an easel, a drawing board and other artists' tools into an axonometric cube, where they invaded a natural world filled with the sound of twittering birds. Inspired by the hunt and military science, NIPpaysage created a hanging basket/house from which one could see without being seen, thus achieving the archetypal observatory. AMMA's tree house was perched at the top of a long ladder. Climbing up to this forest skyscraper recalled the way space is transformed in fairytales. Here again, in this exhibition, the notion of a return to fundamentals was offered in opposition to the triviality of everyday life.

These sundry tree houses expressed an intelligence of recovery, reuse and handiwork, a breath of childhood. Banking on creativity, prompting us to play Robinson Crusoe, the playful structures were like exercises in regeneration. In this they were similar to *Treehouse Kit*, the Guy Ben-Ner piece shown at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal late in the winter. Ben-Ner's installation is at once ironic utopia and utopian irony. Just as the modular sculpture can be dismantled and reassembled, changing from tree to IKEA-style kit and back, the shifting play of intellectual references leads to reflection on similar issues.

Gilles Clément, a landscape artist, works with living things and makes nature the substance of his actions. His projects nestle in the interstices of the urban fabric, in the very heart of abandoned non-places, as seen in the exhibition *Environment: Approaches for Tomorrow* at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (October 18, 2006-June 10, 2007). Clément creates wild gardens where nature is left to manage itself in untended bits of city and countryside, where sites, roadsides, railways and fallow land escape human intervention. To preserve biodiversity without destroying it, he simply leaves these places to their own devices.

Once again, nature stands as a model of place. Open to the monument of memory, nature as a reservoir of evocation and representations glides from image to image like a visual library while the issues accumulate. Undaunted by constraints, nature in Clément's work occupies space with the sole aim of being taken for what it is.

René Viau

Translation by Marcia Couëlle

INTERVIEW WITH GILLES CLÉMENT AND PHILIPPE RAHM

For the exhibition *Environment: Approaches for Tomorrow*,¹ Giovanna Borasi, Curator of Contemporary Architecture at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, brought together French landscape architect Gilles Clément² and Swiss architect Philippe Rahm.³ Clément is known for ambitious natural landscaping projects based on his Third Landscape concept of gardens developed with limited human intervention. Rahm's forte is exploring artificial environments, and his installation *Interior Weather* defends the notion that climate should determine a building's form and function. *ETC* sat down with the two of them at the exhibition opening.

ETC: Your approaches appear to be at odds, which makes it surprising to find you sharing an exhibition. But in some respect you complement each other. How do you see it?

Gilles Clément: It's a logical complementarity, since Philippe is an architect and I am a gardener. Our fields of investigation are different but complementary.

Philippe Rahm: What we have in common is a desire for reality. To work with real material, biological or physiological matter, to truly understand it and make unknown forms and "fictions" emerge. They may be imaginary or poetic, but they are always grounded in reality. The desire for reality is very powerful.

ETC: You also seem to share the present-day reality of environmental concerns. Are you ecologists?

PR: I focus on questions of sustainable development and

climate change, but what interests me is seeing how they can alter architectural form, and even the architectural aesthetic. Today we are faced with the need to radically reduce energy use within buildings. This is actually a new revolution.

ETC: *What factors does sustainable development lead you to look at?*

PR: Ventilation, humidity, inside air exchange, temperature. I try to understand them, to see that they're incorporated, and I redesign plans, cutaways and living arrangements that suggest themselves almost by chance.

ETC: *Are these natural factors of the same concern to you, Gilles Clément?*

GC: No, because I'm subject to weather that I don't control. But I have faith in the ability of living beings to use their ingenuity to reinterpret environmental changes, particularly climate conditions. What worries me, though, is the degradation of the environment, which could alter life's driving force. In terms of biological quality, there is a loss.

ETC: *Are the much-debated climate changes impacting your work? You, Gilles Clément, your gardens are totally conditioned by climate.*

GC: Very much so. The way a garden is designed directly influences the way it is maintained, and the energy it requires. If a garden is designed like the lawn I see from here [This was at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, overlooking the garden with the Melvin Charney sculptures. ED.], it's terrible. All you need to do is eliminate the lawn principle from the concept to come up with something completely different in terms of maintenance and reduced consumption.

PR: I can't explain climate change, but I can see that it's real. For example, we architects are being asked to reduce the energy demand of buildings to a quarter or an eighth of conventional use.

ETC: *Isn't that up to the engineers? Is it the architect's job?*

PR: Today, yes. Traditionally architects knew nothing about empty space. They worked on planes, walls, surfaces, decorations and proportions because they were incapable of intervening on voids. And yet the fundamental purpose of architecture is to occupy a space. Nowadays, to work on space, on voids, we have not only greater means but also these new elements that make up architectural reality.

ETC: *How do you occupy a space in an ecological manner?*

PR: The most eco-friendly building is one that is totally cut off from the outdoors, where not a single window can be opened. To reduce a building's energy consumption, the shell has to be completely sealed, with no outlet. The only link with the exterior is for the purpose of ensuring air exchange. In any event, it's clear that it takes intellectual effort to understand an ecohouse. Architectural questions are being rethought through these issues, in order to make new forms, new uses; and a new aesthetic emerges. This is why I attempt to appropriate the engineers' tools – to avoid being bound by their regulations and being there just to design the inconsequential aspects of a house.

ETC: *In the exhibition catalogue, Giovanna Borasi quotes Jared Diamond,⁴ who sees hope for the future and believes it is in our hands. Gilles Clément, you who preach non-intervention, what do you think?*

GC: The future lies in our hands, in our ability. Unlike plants and animals, we have the awareness, the ability to analyze the phenomena. Just because I favour non-intervention does not mean I believe in doing nothing. By doing nothing, we don't cause harm, which is fine. But we also have to do things, and those things have to give us a clearer picture of what lies ahead. We can't establish a relationship with our planet if we don't know it. And the fact is that we do not know it.

ETC: *How far should intervention go?*

GC: That's a question of cohabitation, of threshold. It's very touchy. How do you exploit diversity without destroying it? That's the threshold: as long as we don't destroy it, as long as we don't alter the mechanism.

ETC: *You explain that the Third Landscape concept "is based on the notion that fallow lots and abandoned fragments" are havens of biodiversity and that, "as such, they represent*

*our future."*⁵ *Is every abandoned lot a third landscape?*

GC: Each case is different. Deciding not to intervene does not mean that a site is abandoned or has no status. It has a definite status. We don't landscape it, but we don't close it to use either. Anyone can go there. It's simply not landscaped. And we do not remove the wealth of items left by visitors. For instance, we often find balls in *L'île Derborence*⁶ – 15 or so every year. They are part of the site's diversity. They testify to people's behaviour and add to the multitude of things that go on there.

ETC: *Should every home have a third landscape?*

GC: Yes, but it's like a garden, where there are always untended areas, for compost heaps, garbage bins, sorting. It has to be planned, of course. Diversity flows from the sum of all that. Part of diversity comes solely from human activity. This is the case of cultivated species that do not occur in nature. And there are many of them.

ETC: *Philippe Rahm, your research deals with the use of natural resources (light, temperature, humidity), and yet your buildings can be completely self-sufficient, almost artificial. Is this a paradox?*

PR: I draw no distinction. For me, light and air are elements of architecture, no matter if they are natural or artificial. I have researched the question of lighting, of the alternation of day and night. In the early 19th century we began eliminating this alternation in cities by installing continuous lighting. It seems natural to us now, but back then it was revolutionary. Today, round-the-clock living and the absence of natural rhythm – which we owe to globalization, the Internet and lifestyles – eventually make seasonal and day-and-night cadences disappear. I'm not against this; I simply observe it and wonder what new physiological or biological exchanges are stemming from these environments, from this transformation of the world.

ETC: *As you see it, having form and function follow climate renews the approach to building design. Am I right that your thinking has a historical basis, drawing on the idea that climate has influenced human evolution?*

PR: My theoretical thinking reposes on two things: the ideas of Jared Diamond, who views the question of climate as decisive in human history, and the cinematic vision of Alain Robbe-Grillet, conceived as an art of the present. Diamond's concept of history is based on – to put it simply – climate considerations. He cites the example of a people that migrated by boat to two different Pacific islands, one very fertile, the other hard to cultivate. A hundred years later, the settlers of the second island attacked the others, killed them, wiped them out. Diamond sees this as an instance of behaviour that occurs when people can no longer grow things, when they are forced to relocate, to migrate.

ETC: *And Robbe-Grillet?*

PR: I was inspired by him after seeing *Last Year at Marienbad*, the Alain Resnais film that won the Golden Palm [Golden Lion at the 1961 Venice Film Festival. ED.]. While writing the script, Robbe-Grillet observed that cinema is always in the continuous present, as opposed to writing, where you can say "I am" or "I was." Images are always in the present; you can never film the past. In *Last Year at Marienbad*, the past, the present and the future coexist, play out together, in real time. For me, the new sustainable development questions, new techniques and new architectural factors such as humidity are that cinematic present, the actual material. If you work at the material level, you can make unexpected spaces emerge. You get away from functionality, you introduce freedom of use. Spaces will no longer be determined beforehand. The "bathroom" space will also serve other purposes.

ETC: *That's the revolution you mentioned. You question the traditional configuration of domestic spaces?*

PR: Yes, but you have to remember that bathrooms and libraries are very recent programs in the history of architecture. What I now believe is that the intermediate space between the outdoors and another highly conditioned space kept at a certain temperature will become more important. We will live in in-betweens, in colder spaces in winter or warmer spaces in summer, but not in

spaces maintained at 20° year-round. Modernity has led to homogenization, and we have to go beyond it.

GC: Listening to you, Philippe, I realize that you see human beings as well-defined systems for which you make living environments evolve. To my mind, human beings have to evolve as well, at the same time. By that I mean that the “containers” in which humans live – their skin, their body – are also subject to environmental pressures and changes. Since I subscribe to the idea of transforming functions through evolution, I am convinced that the climate exerts a unifying influence on living beings. And that they have an ability, albeit slow-moving, to reinterpret themselves.

Interview conducted by Jérôme Delgado

Translation by Marcia Couëlle

Endnotes

¹ At the Canadian Centre for Architecture, from October 18, 2006, to April 22, 2007.

² Clément prefers to be called a gardener. He created the gardens for the new Quai de Branly museum in Paris and has authored a number of publications.

³ Rahm's many projects include the installation *Hormonarium* (with Jean-Gilles Décosterd) at the 8th Venice Architecture Biennale (2002) and exhibitions at Centre Pompidou (2004) and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2001).

⁴ J. Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, New York: Viking, 2004.

⁵ G. Clément, “Working with (and never against) Nature,” in G. Borasi, Gilles Clément/Philippe Rahm, *environ(nement)*, Milan: CCA and Skira, 2006. See also G. Clément, *Manifeste du Tiers paysage*, Paris: Éditions Sujet/Objet, 2004.

⁶ This project, winner of the competition for Matisse Park in Lille (1991-1995), preceded the Third Landscape theory but is based on similar ideas.

It was as a photographer that he first began roaming remote areas, seeking new perspectives on the landscape, or countryside. Now, as we know, “countryside,” in the broad sense of the word, presupposes “country,” which in Latin is defined as the terrain opposite the viewer. But being of an artistic nature, landscape brings something more to country. Indeed, the history of landscape implies a process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. The creative act produces a change of scenery; it is essentially movement, displacement. This is why photography alone has never been enough for Aubé, and why he has always coupled it with an experience of landscape and its borders, as opposed to our vision of nature.⁴ Very early on, therefore, this experience turned into action, taking the form of recovering phenomena. The phenomena in question are elements belonging to the real world but whose existence is either invisible or inaudible, and they are revealed to us through technology and art. Having dealt with the water of a forgotten river and the energy stored in a wind turbine,⁵ Aubé enlisted a technology able to capture VLF sounds and set out in quest of Earth's musicality. VLF signals, also called natural radio emissions, are waves that can be captured only by VLF receivers. Aubé equipped himself with various versions of these devices and began recording sounds from electromagnetic solar or terrestrial storms, and especially the electromagnetic murmurs of polar auroras.

As luminous phenomena visible with the naked eye, the aurora borealis, or northern lights, have always been a source of fascination. Long before modern physics could theorize about this light show in the sky, it was the subject of countless myths. But when the first space probes were launched in the late 1950s, science eagerly seized upon the celestial marvel. As a planet, Earth is not an inert system. The magnetic field that envelopes it conducts electricity and is subject to constantly fluctuating climatic and electromagnetic influences such as electric storms, solar winds and auroras. Auroral light is the result of charged particles from the magnetosphere colliding with atoms and ions in the ionosphere. In a nutshell, the electric universe that surrounds Earth turns the cosmic space into an acoustic universe. To capture its sounds, in particular those flowing from the northern lights, one must go north, of course. So, between 2001 and 2003, Aubé made expeditions that took him to Batican Lake in the Laurentian Park (Quebec); to an island in the St. Lawrence River; to the Finnish area of Lapland, 250 kilometres from the polar circle; and finally to Scotland and the banks of Loch Ness. He then began using his recordings in performances and acoustic installations that also include images of northern landscapes, establishing a link between the earth that we walk on and Earth that moves in infinity.⁶

However, such captured natural sounds made audible through technological art are increasingly harder to come by. VLF signals are obstructed by electromagnetic emissions caused by human activity, so Aubé's aural landscapes additionally reveal the anticipated disappearance of these sounds. Already in Lapland and Scotland, his VLF antennas picked up radio waves coming from powerful submarines. But electromagnetic emissions also radiate from power grids all over the globe, especially in urban areas. The series of sound installations titled *Save the Waves* was designed to make audible the electromagnetic pollution of our surroundings. The first experiment was conducted in the summer of 2004 at Quartier Éphémère in Montreal, where eight VLF receivers were installed in the gallery to spy on the electromagnetic field generated by the nearby Hydro-Québec transformers. A mass of parabolic speakers forming a monumental sculpture enabled visitors to hear the captured sounds, which were integral to the work of art. Other versions of this staging of our acoustic universe have since been presented in Quebec and abroad, with the primary focus being the electromagnetic field of the exhibition venue.⁷

As mentioned above, Aubé recovers this sensory data solely for artistic purposes, as is true of many electronic art practitioners who work with electromagnetic waves.

IN THE HEAVENS AS ON EARTH ON JEAN-PIERRE AUBÉ'S ECOLOGY OF WAVES

“But ‘technique’ must be learned as the infinity of the art that compensates for a nature that has never existed and never will. A well-understood ecology can be nothing but a technology.”

Jean-Luc Nancy¹

With the Copernican Revolution, Earth, previously considered the defining basis of our worldview, was demoted to a simple planet revolving around the sun. This earth-and-heaven-shaking event called into question our ancestral conception of humankind's place in the cosmos and sent shivers up the spines of the many Renaissance artists and poets who subscribed to that popular belief, for scientific thinking, now governed by the rigorous laws of mathematics, carried the threat of being wrenched from a familiar existence. The resulting cleavage between the lived world and the more abstract realm of science would also lead to a crisis in our understanding of the world's meaning.² As a remedy to this crisis, the philosopher Edmund Husserl prescribed “a return to things themselves” and the restoration of world-constituting subjectivity, which, for the origin of geometry, meant giving new priority to the experience of Earth as being immovable.³ Even though no one today can contest its mobility, Earth remains for those of us who inhabit it more than a simple planet. As “body-ground,” it is the indispensable horizon of our world. How, then, can an art that utilizes an ecology of waves, as does that of Jean-Pierre Aubé, reconcile a representation of Earth as planet with an aesthetic of landscape?

Aubé has been interested in VLF (very low frequency) waves since 2000. His attraction to these waves stems from a reflection on landscape that grew out of photography.

BGL: SELF-RECYCLING

But the deliberate inclusion of the ecology of waves in a landscape aesthetic makes Aubé's photography-derived perspective very clear: In extending the landscape to the entire globe and even beyond, the purpose of "artificializing" sonic space is always to make the imperceptible visible or audible. Hence, the ecology of waves has nothing to do with ecology as environmental science. Its only interest lies in using technology to explore the aural world that surrounds us. As *oikos*, or living space, planet Earth may well be a wandering star in an "acosmic cosmology,"⁸ but it is also our ultimate point of reference. In that sense, the ecology of waves relates to aesthetics understood as sensitivity to the world that physically affects us. Accordingly, Aubé considers all scientific and technical information to be at the service of art. While science has enabled us to elucidate the real and demystify natural phenomena since the advent of modernity, it subjects technique to a theory of nature that puts it at a remove from art, from the creation of a living world. But Aubé's projects, like most works of technological art, are not produced with a view to conquering space. They simply use available scientific data to give Earth a new face, and to lend an attentive ear to the world of the future.

In the project *Photo-synthèse* [Photo-synthesis], begun in Montreal and completed at the Pančevó Biennale in 2004, Aubé showed pictures of the sky viewed from Earth that were recorded using photoelectric cells for spectral analysis. These black-and-white images convey the portrait, as it were, of a day corresponding to a particular terrestrial location. Most recently, Aubé presented an installation titled *Titan and Beyond the Infinite*.⁹ This piece refers to the Huygens probe, which reached Titan, one of Saturn's moons, on January 14, 2005. After journeying three billion kilometres from Earth, the probe proceeded to record telemetric data by means of sensors. Aubé used this data to shape the installation's sound and visuals. The visuals allude to the Stanley Kubrick film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, released in 1968, one year before humans first set foot on the moon. More specifically, they recall the segment subtitled "Jupiter and Beyond the Infinite," for which the slit-scan technique was used to create illusory motion in images that, by evoking a world open to infinity, represent the ultimate limit of landscape. Kubrick's aim was to show man adrift in a world that has lost all meaning. But in Aubé's installation, this lack of meaning becomes a virtual experience of the infinite, since the landscape has no borders.

André-Louis Paré

Translation by Marcia Couëlle

Endnotes

¹ See *Le sens du monde*, Paris: Éd. Gallée, 1993, p. 66.

² This crisis was analyzed by the philosopher Edmund Husserl in a book written in 1934 and first published in English as *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1970.

³ Edmund Husserl, *The Earth Does Not Move*, a text written in 1934 and first published in English in *Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1940.

⁴ On the notion of landscape and border, see my article "Espaces, paysages, frontières" dealing with the work of J.-P. Aubé, *Parachute*, fall 2005, no. 120.

⁵ For these two projects, as for those discussed in this essay, see the artist's website: <http://www.kloud.org>

⁶ One example of what has been done with these archives was shown in 2003 at the Festival du nouveau cinéma et des nouveaux médias (Montreal). Assisted by the musician Mathias Delplanque, Aubé presented a diptych of northern landscapes accompanied by a sound track that included sounds captured by VLF antennas. This project can be seen and heard here: http://www.kloud.org/doc/video/finlande_vlf.html

⁷ The domestic version of amplified electromagnetic pollution has been shown at, among other venues, Mois Multi (Quebec City, 2005); *Trafic*, an event organized by L'Écart (Rouyn-Noranda, 2005); ZKM in Karlsruhe (Germany, 2005); Medialab in Madrid (Spain, 2006); and V2 in Rotterdam (Netherlands, 2006).

⁸ See Jean-Luc Nancy, p. 62.

⁹ This installation was shown as part of the Quebec Scene event in the group show *Making Real*, held April 20-May 5, 2007, in Ottawa. Curator: Marie Fraser.

If there is one category apt to encompass the near entirety of the BGL artist collective's production, it has to be "recycling." Aside from the fact that much of the threesome's past work was made from recovered materials, their oeuvre as a whole conveys a discourse on overconsumption that resonates more or less loudly from one piece to the next. In one of their latest appearances, Jasmin Bilodeau, Sébastien Giguère and Nicolas Laverdière brought a new twist to this dimension. The show at L'œil de Poisson in Quebec City¹ was all about BGL recycling itself, devising novel links among the pieces in what resembled a self-produced retrospective, links that point towards what I feel should be seen as an ecology of objects, similar to the "ecology of images" that Susan Sontag wanted for photography.

No one who has followed contemporary art developments these past years can be unaware of the growing role of exhibition curators drawn from wide-ranging professions. With these sundry visions brought to bear on art for the sole purpose of mounting exhibitions, a new process of managing art objects has emerged. There is no need to enumerate the steps that anyone undertaking to curate an exhibition must go through, but it bears recalling that this process defines the entire social and industrial organization of the art system – the apparatus governing the production, distribution and use of art in contemporary culture – and it is worth looking into whether there is an ecological argument to be made in respect to these procedures. The curatorial mechanics serve to measure the ability of those involved to forge discourses supported by ways of presenting works, and to create discourses or contents with the properties needed to foster momentum among the works, based on relationships that unite objects not necessarily conceived to rub shoulders around the word "art."

Hence, as you no doubt suspect, I believe that this manner of occupying the interstices can be viewed as an ecosystem, or at least as the cohabitation of elements in a given environment. The following comments on BGL's most recent solo show are exploratory, but the question to be answered is whether this exhibition, titled *Le Discours des éléments* [Discourse of elements], does, in fact, lend itself to supporting an ecological discourse. To this end, we must first agree that the term "ecology," which is increasingly used in relation to political ideologies and even a certain activism, is to be understood here with its primary meaning as "the science of habitat." That said, I am tempted to go back to the approach proposed by Susan Sontag, who, aspiring to "an ecology of images," suggested a "conservationist remedy"² to the glut of imagery that is still fittingly bemoaned today. Sontag's prescription may be debatable, given its implicitly medical metaphor, but it nonetheless provides a glimpse of curatorial work as dealing with objects (or images) of a living nature for which articulating the links among them comes down to making them *inhabit* the same more or less controlled environment. But the analogy with BGL's production, as I see it, goes beyond the metaphor and deserves to be developed.

Acculturating Space

From the outset, in 1996, BGL's art more often than not has been associated with a practice whose humour in no way diminishes a social thrust wholly targeted to pointing up the errors and abuses of consumer society. Suffice it to think, for example, of the hundreds of plastic containers used in the bluntly titled *Abondance difficile à regarder* [Unbearable abundance], shown at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec in 2002. Suspending this debris high in the glassed atrium of the museum's entrance hall obliged viewers to look up and scrutinize objects that, despite being pleasingly grouped and revitalized by art, continued to reveal themselves, unmistakably, as a mass of rubbish.

Throughout a decade of creation, and in line with the primary reading just mentioned, BGL's reviews have often included comments to the effect that, by producing at such an intensive pace, the collective would soon run out of steam. But an impressive string of successes

has proved the critics' concern ill-founded. On the other hand, ten years of sustained production and appearances in artist-run centres, public art events and, recently, a commercial gallery³ have undoubtedly led to a sizable accumulation of works in the trio's studio, replicating, in a way, the hotly decried industrial production system. In any event, at two of their exhibitions in 2006, the artists gave the impression of being in retrospective mode.⁴ One sign of this is the quasi-derisive title and subtitle they chose for the private gallery show – *Se la jouer commerciale (esthétique de présentation)* [Playing it commercial (aesthetics of presentation)] – which heavily underscores the keen awareness that runs through all BGL work of how exhibition rhetoric has become part of the creative act.

At L'œil de Poisson, the threesome addressed the exhibition medium more explicitly. Capitalizing on renovations being done to enlarge the art centre's smaller gallery, they unceremoniously blocked the entrance of the main gallery to force visitors to come in through the broom closet. Thus they turned the construction site to their advantage, creating confusion at the doorstep even before allowing a glimpse of art. And pushing the concept to the extreme, they enlisted a space not normally used to display art to play into the exhibition theme, not so much by misappropriating this peripheral area as by exploiting it for what it is: a non-place. Visitors squeezed through the narrow corridor of the tiny storeroom, and then entered a labyrinth. It was far less vast, of course, than *À l'abri des arbres* [In the shelter of the trees],⁵ which BGL had installed at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal five years earlier, but it still managed to acculturate the gallery space and confound all attempts to precisely locate the exhibition's starting point. Anyone bent on finding it was doomed to failure, since demarcation had been spurned in favour of consideration of the ecology of the entire object industry; in other words, production, distribution and consumption.

Natural Order

Past an array of the centre's household products and other implements, around a corner in the proposed path, another series of shelves had been added, with nothing to signal a change in the nature of the stored objects. Even for a BGL fan familiar with the trio's work, it took a bit of head-clearing to recognize the pell-mell display as a frenetic jumble of objects drawn from ten years of exhibitions. This vertiginous condensation of artworks amassed as if in a warehouse, in no particular order and with no attempt at classification, presented the entire retrospective of a career, but in a chaotic fashion primarily intended to reintroduce the works, but this time as refuse.

By substituting themselves for an exhibition curator in this way, by taking charge of their own retrospective, the artists demonstrated their ingenuity not just by recycling earlier work disguised as rubbish but – and this is even more interesting – by orchestrating a change of status for their own art; by giving it a fresh environment, a new habitat. An exhibition curator would have attempted to classify this dense production to some extent, if only for purposes of analysis or interpretation. But BGL essentially achieved just the opposite. By adding raw materials alongside works recognizable despite their fragmentation or partial dismantling, they demoted objects previously qualified as art to the rank of matter. They reversed the creation cycle, relegating form back to formless and creation back to reusable material. In doing so, they gave an unexpected slant to the now humdrum notion of moving the artist's studio to the gallery, preferring a migration from warehouse to gallery. From creation to storage, then back towards creation – the entire cycle of life and, for lack of a better word, death of the art was called into question.

Besides the disqualification of artworks, there were other avenues to explore. In the right-hand wall of shelving there was an aperture, a hole with edges charred as if by a brief fire. Enticing viewers to peek through and then, if adventurous, to cross this new threshold, another installation beckoned, like a parallel universe.

On the other side of the wall stood a make-believe car draped in black material, along with the curiously converted motorcycle used in the 2005 street performance *Rapides et dangereux* [Fast and dangerous] in Quebec City. The open trunk of the car (also shown at the 9th Havana Biennial in spring 2006) was like a gallery within a gallery, presenting a fake fireplace, complete with undulating flames, and constituting the last stop on one of the possible itineraries of this highly singular showcase.

On the other side of the entrance corridor, reached by means of a pivoting wall (a device not unfamiliar in BGL's work), the visit continued in another room where a see-saw holding a disco ball had pride of place. With the wall pivot rigged up to the see-saw pivot by cables, entering this third room sent the ball rolling and spinning. The result was to transform the walls, ceiling and floor into a three-dimensional screen lit by the swirling lights of the galaxy and recalling the popular long-exposure photographs that condense the effects of the earth's rotation in a single image adance with twinkling stars seen as luminous circles.

This second terminus in the multicircuit exhibition opened up another perspective, one near to the environmental concerns manifested in the artists' previous work. By contrasting the shelved bits of art with the dark starry sky, they effectively countered the abundance of human production – and the profusion of their own production – with an artificially suggested natural order. Contrary to all expectations, BGL's strength has proven to be the ability to adapt the rhetoric of retrospective presentations to a discourse whose greatest feat lies in taking place into account without being site-specific. To achieve this, and in order to spark a discourse on the components, BGL first had to alter the entire ecosystem of the exhibition medium to make it resonate with ecological meaning.

Bernard Lamarche

Translation by Marcia Couëlle

Endnotes

¹ The exhibition ran from September 8 to October 8, 2006, at the Quebec City gallery where BGL began its career, in 1997. Most of the imposing installation was later shown at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts in the presentation of regional finalists for the 2006 Sobey Art Award, from October 17, 2006, to January 7, 2007.

² Sontag uses this term in regard to photographic images in the final lines of the conclusion of her book *On Photography* (New York, Dell Pub., 1978 c.1977, p. 180).

³ Art Mûr gallery in Montreal, in January 2006.

⁴ On this subject see the articles by Jérôme Delgado, "Oser franchir le mur de la galerie" in *La Presse* (Friday, January 20, 2006, arts and entertainment section, p. 4), and by Nicolas Mavrikakis, "Le trio fantastique. Chasse-galerie ?" in *VOIR Montréal* (Thursday, January 19, 2006, p. 16). The former comments that the collective has managed to "give itself a sort of mini retrospective;" the latter simply notes that the trio has "repeated pieces displayed here and there."

⁵ Composed of a succession of surprises, "gaze traps" and dead-end corridors, the immense environment was like a grotto of wood and recovered cardboard boxes, presenting parallel and communicating worlds. BGL had produced an ecosystem using heaps of items through which the path led to a promontory appearing in the heart of a forest of small sculpturally sketched conifers.