

La géographie de Bill Vazan

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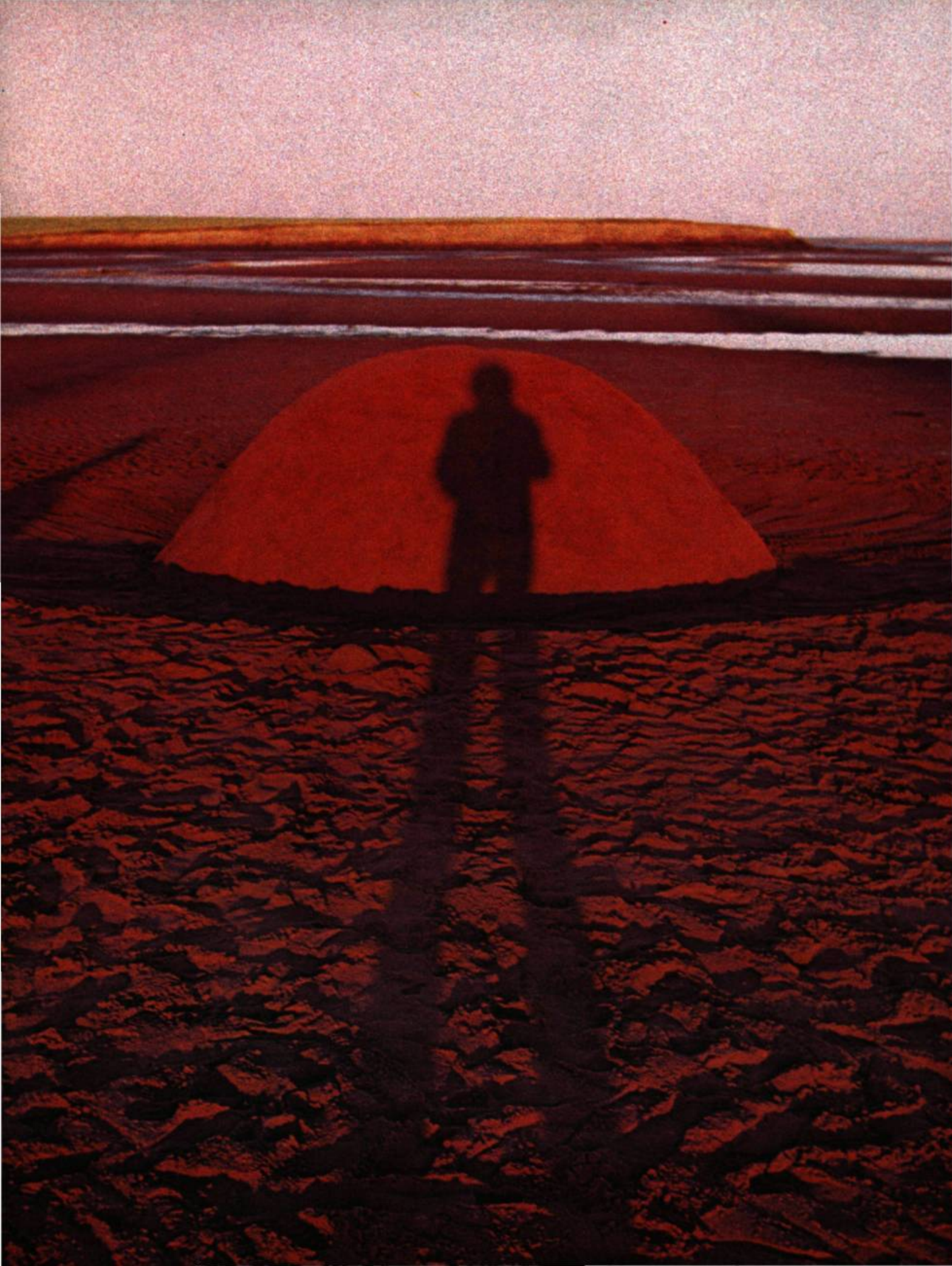
la géographie de Bill Vazan

Les limitations que les artistes du temps passé connaissaient sont désormais abolies. Plus de frontières, plus d'idéologie préconçue; seulement une grande force prospective qui prend racine dans les mystères mêmes de la création et de l'homme. L'art est anarchie, et sa conscience expansive en fait sans cesse, au cours de son évolution historique, l'anarchie de l'anarchie.

Lorsque je regarde sur ma table de travail les photographies des multiples facettes de l'oeuvre de Bill Vazan — le Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal lui consacre une exposition en décembre —, il m'apparaît évident que cet artiste explore sans relâche l'univers. Il y a là des cartes postales qu'il m'a envoyées, le livre de la *Ligne mondiale*, des photos d'oeuvres en extérieur et en intérieur, des résumés de réalisations vidéographiques, etc. Tous les moyens lui sont bons pour parvenir à la connaissance et au rêve... Ces diverses tangentes de l'oeuvre de Vazan pourraient nous faire croire qu'il est à l'affût d'un style qu'il n'a pas encore trouvé et que ses voies d'exploration aux apparences contradictoires, qui vont du tableau de chevalet à une forme d'art conceptuel, ne présentent aucune identité personnelle. Il n'en est rien. Son cheminement n'a rien du coq-à-l'âne mais possède, au contraire, certains principes unificateurs que nous tenterons d'esquisser.

Trois ans au Collège d'Art d'Ontario, un an à Paris où il fréquente sans grande conviction l'École des Beaux-Arts, pour préférer par la suite parcourir l'Europe sur le pouce, retour à Montréal en 1962 où il redécouvre, sur un lit d'hôpital, après dix ans d'abstention, la joie et le besoin de créer. Quelques aquarelles, des dessins le mèneront en 1963 vers ces tableaux à l'huile sillonnés de fils de fer comme des champs de chaînes qui révèlent déjà inconsciemment certaines structures d'organisation qui nous rappellent des vues à vol d'oiseau. En 1964, les petits signes structurés noirs sur fond blanc évoquent, cette fois-ci, des maquettes de planification urbaine comme s'il s'agissait de vérita-

Août 1969. La culture récupérée par la nature : ce monticule de sable, érigé à marée basse à la baie Paul's Bluff, Victoria, Ile-du-Prince-Édouard, fut complètement balayé par la marée haute.
(Phot. Bill Vazan)



bles plans de villes. Curieusement, l'année suivante (sans qu'il oublie ses recherches précédentes comme nous le verrons par la suite), Bill Vazan passe au hard edge. De grands tableaux qui ressemblent à d'immenses monogrammes établissent des illusions de profondeur en s'appuyant sur des jeux délicats et nuancés de valeurs tonales.

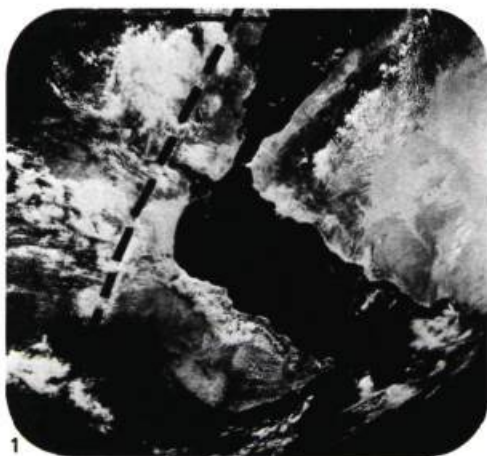
Une définition de l'art

Ces oeuvres géométriques jouèrent un rôle étrange dans la vie et l'oeuvre de Vazan. Les valeurs tonales en relation devinrent presque monochromes. Un tableau de couleur aluminium, par exemple, se constituait en zones énergétiques par un jeu chromatique interne qui se situait aux limites des possibilités de différenciation des nuances de cette même couleur aluminium. De ces tableaux, l'idée d'une autre possi-

bilité d'exploration prit naissance par hasard, comme le veut souvent l'oeuvre d'art. En jouant avec une de ses filles dans le sable de Wells Beach, au Maine, il vit celle-ci écrire son nom sur la plage avec un bâtonnet. A ce moment, en 1967, Bill Vazan ne savait rien du *land art*, qui prenait d'ailleurs naissance aux États-Unis. Saisir l'espace externe, telle avait toujours été

l'essence de sa démarche. Sur cette même plage, il se coucha et se fit recouvrir de sable. En se relevant et en voyant la trace de son corps sur la plage, il pensa: « Pourquoi ne serait-ce pas de l'art? »

De nombreuses oeuvres en extérieur où Vazan reprenait les principes de ses tableaux géométriques en divisant des étendues de terrain en zones furent



1. 5 mars 1971. *La Ligne mondiale* traversant l'Afrique et aboutissant à Turku (Finlande) et à Port-Louis (Ile Maurice). (Phot. N.A.S.A.)

2. 5 mars 1971. *La Ligne mondiale* traverse la France pour aboutir au Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.

3. *Pont*, 1968-1972. Dix lamelles jaunes en bois (5'' x 96'') disposées en cercle dans une carrière de l'Est de Montréal. (Phot. Robert Walker)

4. 7 mars 1970. *5000 pas*. Transformation par l'artiste du paysage enneigé dans la région de Montréal, au cours d'une éclipse solaire. (Phot. Bill Vazan)

créées. Les seuls témoignages de ces travaux (donc l'oeuvre en soi) demeurent la photographie. Il façonna sur une plage de la côte Est une espèce de sculpture en sable qui donnait l'impression d'être une immense trappe. La marée détruisit peu à peu l'oeuvre, comme le montrent les différentes diapositives de l'artiste. Il créa dans la forêt des lignes de polythène qu'il appelait ses *light lines*, où le soleil en réfraction jouait doucement avec cette matière. A Beaconsfield, il activait l'espace en reliant les arbres entre eux avec de nombreux réseaux de cordes. Un dôme rouge fait avec le sable de l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard, par sa forme d'orbe, devient un objet culturel aux prises avec les éléments naturels. Une seule de ces idées donne suite à des dizaines d'autres réalisations qui nécessiteraient, pour en rendre compte, une volumineuse monographie.

L'histoire du monde devient alors une perpétuelle *recréation*. La notion d'*éphémérité* inclut l'oeuvre et l'homme, avec une certaine conscience sage de la fuite du temps, dans les transformations successives de l'univers. L'être humain, par cet acte, s'inscrit dans les métamorphoses cosmiques. Il se détache peu à peu de son vieil idéal anthropocentrique. Le rêve, chez Bill Vazan, rejoint les données objectives de ses oeuvres en extérieur. Toute la voie lactée ou la galaxie d'Andromède n'est-elle pas là, enfouie au creux d'une poignée de sable, inhérente à l'oeuvre et s'accouplant à sa signification antitragique?

L'oeuvre de Bill Vazan, comme celle de beaucoup de ses contemporains, poursuit cette lutte incessante contre la conception traditionnelle de l'art. Elle pactise avec le vandalisme qui détruisit en partie la *Pietà* de Michel-Ange. Elle affirme catégoriquement que les choses ne doivent pas durer. Cependant les caractères qui définissent l'identité propre de Vazan résident ailleurs, dans ces autres recherches qui paraissent parfois entrer en contradiction avec celles que nous venons de mentionner.

Présence de la ligne

Pendant que Vazan traçait une parenthèse sur une des plages de l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard, le 13 août 1969, au même moment sur la côte ouest du pays, un autre artiste, Ian Wallace, fermait la parenthèse. A cette mainmise gigantesque sur l'espace exté-

rieur correspondent les saisies intérieures que le public a eu l'occasion de voir au Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal, lors de l'exposition *Sondage*, de 1969, et à la Galerie d'Art de l'Ontario, à la fin de l'année suivante. Les rubans gommés qui couraient en oblique sur le plancher et sur les murs créaient une impression de chute spatiale et ouvraient l'architecture des édifices indéfiniment, un peu à la manière des tableaux de Mondrian. Autour de l'Île de Montréal, ainsi que d'un océan à l'autre, Vazan créa des points versifs par lesquels des lignes unissaient le parcours géographique de ces lieux. Enfin, le 5 mars 1971, la *Ligne mondiale*, qui réunissait plus de vingt pays, encerclait le globe. Entre le concept et le réel matériel, cette *Ligne mondiale*, à l'instar de la ligne transcanadienne, est une synthèse des principaux constituants de l'oeuvre de Vazan.

En redéfinissant le concept d'oeuvre d'art, la *Ligne mondiale* reprend la thématique des premières oeuvres de Vazan qui évoluaient autour d'une topographie imaginaire recrée dans ses tableaux de 1963, 1964 et même dans ceux de 1972⁽¹⁾; elle résume aussi cette prise de possession créée des oeuvres en extérieur. L'oeuvre d'art demeure toujours un signe de culture sémiologique. (Nous verrons d'ailleurs que le signe chez Vazan sous-tend certaines préoccupations linguistiques.) Toutes les personnes qui coopèrent à l'oeuvre — moi qui écris cet article, par exemple — en deviennent une des manifestations. La *Ligne mondiale*, par ses résonances écologiques et géographiques, établit un lien entre l'homme et la nature. Tous les paysages qu'elle traverse se voient inclus dans le processus de l'oeuvre, grâce à l'habileté de l'homme à faire une ligne presque droite, donc civilisée.

Le travail de Vazan, avec ou selon les cartes géographiques, découle directement de ce jeu entre la nature et la culture. La carte est en soi une autre sorte de langage, un autre signe, un peu comme l'écriture chinoise. Cet archétype de la connaissance humaine qu'est la carte n'est pas nécessairement codifié chez Vazan. L'espace, l'atmosphère, la lumière, la distance, le temps sont souvent englobés d'une manière empirique dans ses réalisations. C'est là qu'entre en jeu ce que j'appelais les préoccupations linguistiques de Vazan, le signifiant, soit les *Lignes* où les tableaux ou encore les

oeuvres en extérieur ne s'intègrent pas toujours de façon cartésienne dans la relation normale signifiant/signifié. Ainsi, lorsque Vazan juxtapose sur une carte postale deux correspondances de métro (l'une prise à la station Place des Arts et l'autre à la station Laurier, à huit minutes d'intervalle) au lieu de calculer l'angle géographique en degrés comme cela devrait se faire, il intitule sa carte *Angle de 8 minutes*. Une convention codée est prise pour une autre. Il fixe son espace en coordonnées temporelles comme si le temps et l'espace étaient une seule et même chose.

La dernière réalisation vidéographique de Vazan, qui s'intitule *Stylo à vue*, reprend ce problème. En filmant la ville au vidéo, l'artiste écrit à même l'espace avec son appareil le nom des choses qu'il vise. Ici, le signifiant et le signifié sont confrontés dans cette combinaison du langage et de l'image. La *Ligne de vie*⁽²⁾ fait aussi partie de cette jonglerie spatio-temporelle des recherches de Vazan. Chaque jour, depuis le 30 janvier 1970, Vazan envoie à Wallace une carte postale sur laquelle il trace un segment d'un pouce, et ce jusqu'à la mort d'un des deux participants. On pense aux 365 marches de certains temples aztèques et à toutes ces énigmes du passé.

Le mystère des lignes de Vazan, même si nous avons tenté d'en cerner quelques émergences rationnelles, demeure. Il s'apparente à ces lignes très anciennes de Nazca, au Pérou, qui semblaient ne rien signifier vues du sol, mais qui révélaient des indications visibles seulement de très haut. C'est vers ces altitudes que nous convient sans cesse les oeuvres de Bill Vazan. Elles font partie de cette nouvelle sensibilité ludique qui s'éveille chez l'homme contemporain et qui fait de l'art une merveilleuse anarchie.

English Translation, p. 98

(1) C'est d'ailleurs ce travail parallèle de création de tableaux de chevalet qui nous a fait suspecter une contradiction interne dans l'oeuvre de Vazan. Le lieu de création établissait une redéfinition des particularités de l'objet d'art en refusant les limites traditionnelles de la toile. En admettant la destruction des limites et des bornes matérielles dans l'élaboration de l'oeuvre, rien n'empêche l'artiste de revenir à des préoccupations spatiales plus limitées. Le contenu des tableaux de Vazan est en étroite relation avec ses tendances topographiques. Ils sont constitués de lignes colorées très courtes (environ un pouce), juxtaposées de façon à créer des zones d'ensemble semblables à des cartes climatologiques. Ils se rattachent donc à cette passion de Vazan pour ce signe autre qu'est la présentation visuelle des cartes géographiques et se maintiennent dans la sémiologie personnelle de l'artiste.

(2) L'idée de la *Ligne de vie* provient directement de l'expérience de l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard où, avec Wallace à Vancouver, Vazan mit le Canada entre parenthèses.

vastness. He is without question the Canadian artist most closely related to the primitive arts of the country. Like his father-in-law, Marius Barbeau, the well known Canadian anthropologist and historian, the clays of the Haidas of British Columbia like the totems of other Indian tribes of Western Canada fascinated him early in his career. Although their influence was less felt, some of the several birds in flight executed by Art Price over the years show clearly that stages spent in the north had a certain effect on him. Whatever their size, his sculptures always give the impression that they were conceived on a very large scale. This probably explains the reflection of the vastness of the land which he tries and very often successfully conveys. He could be better described as the sculptor of the Canadian wilderness perhaps as Tom Tompson was in his paintings. Neither of them could be properly described as urban artists. Although generally figurative and only a step away from realism, his work conveys, and often with force, thoughts, impressions, feelings and moods very distant from the subject or the form used to achieve this. The subject is strictly an expedient, nothing else. He is somewhat of a perfectionist who leaves nothing to chance. The end product offers little room if any to add or subtract anything.

The road Art Price took from the beginning was a hard one. Painter, illustrator, film director, stage decorator, he came to sculpture gradually. The beginning may seem to some like a form of hesitation. I do not think it was. Circumspection would be a more appropriate word. Looking back at what he has done over the past thirty years, it becomes obvious and clear that Art Price knew what he was doing, what he wanted to do and which path he would follow to do it. From this retiring man, one could not expect sudden impulses or surprising flamboyant gestures. Every approach is rational, properly analysed and never accidental. Spontaneity resides in the conceptual approach but not in the execution which bears clearly the stamp of an artist in absolute command of his material and never the other way around. The great simplification seen in recent works reveals without the shadow of a doubt that every gesture is calculated. This reduction to the bare elements or to the very essence of the subject is not without risks, but with Art Price, the idea or the spirit remains present. It is true that time alone will tell if these works will like all others endure the passing of years, but for what they evoke effectively and the aesthetic qualities which reside in these sculptures, chances are that they will. For a man who is well known not to be very loquacious, the work of the past decade stands by itself as a very eloquent and powerful statement.

For those who wonder what kind of a man Art Price is, the answer is relatively simple. He is a polite and charming man who goes his own way without fracas. He abhors noise except that of his studio, where he spends a great deal of his time. He has little time for polemics or empty arty discussions. The hours of the day which are always too few for this artist are shared between his family and his work which will keep him busy for years to come for there is still a great deal to be said. If he is not very talkative, he is a very keen observer as well as a patient listener. He is well read and can sort out the valuable from the rubbish. He reminds one of Zadkine, the great European sculptor.

Like him he seems to move silently with works mushrooming from one ocean to the other, perhaps silent and looming at first, but soon standing firmly against the Canadian background proud and somewhat defiant. Like Zadkine, he has a deep sense of space and height, using the earth as well as the sky to give a feeling of mobility to his work. Well aware of the relation that must exist between the architectural and the sculptural for works intended for public buildings or similar projects, his work is conceived bearing this in mind. Like Paolo Soleri, the structures of the future intrigue him, and it is clear that he has given it some thought. From what he has done recently, it would appear that he agrees that the functional can and should have aesthetic qualities as an essential condition in its conception or design. With a reputation which is reaching further and further with time, Art Price has done and is doing far more for the Canadian image than we have given him credit for so far. It is Lynn Chadwick who told me not so long ago: "Look out for Price, he will outlast and outgrow a great many." This he may well do. In the meantime we must recognize that he has contributed significantly to transform the generally mundane, large-sized public buildings or utilities into something more aesthetically dramatic.

If some of his early work seemed conceptually confined within a national context, that of more recent years is clearly addressed to a much wider public, well beyond our boundaries. It is a modern language in which the parochial has no room. It seems to be a fairly accurate reflection of this era where the technological accomplishments and its accelerating progress would have shattered the wildest dreams of the thirties. It is also a projection of the contemporary man's way of thinking, of unlimited possibilities. It is not easy to say it and it takes courage to do so. Art Price obviously has it. Regarding the future, although this has not been finalized yet, Art Price is looking into the possibility of executing sculptures in precious metals such as gold and silver. Somewhat similar in concept to those created by Georges Braque and Salvador Dalí some years ago, these will be done on a relatively small scale. They will differ from those of Braque and Dalí as they will not be conceived and intended as jewelry but strictly as miniature sculptures standing on their very own. Should the project materialize, it should be interesting to see the results.



THE GEOGRAPHY OF BILL VAZAN

By Gilles TOUPIN

The limitations which the artists of former times knew are henceforth abolished. There are no more boundaries, no more preconceived ideology; only a great forward-looking force which takes root in the very mysteries of creation and of man. Art is chaos, and its expansive consciousness makes of it without ceasing, during the course of its historic evolution, the anarchy of chaos.

When I look on my work table at the photographs of the many facets of the work of Bill Vazan, it appears evident to me that this artist continually explores the universe. There are postcards which he has sent me, the book of the *Ligne mondiale*, photos of works of exterior and interior, summaries of videographic achievements, etc. All means are good for him to attain knowledge and dreams... These different tangents of the work of Vazan could make us believe that he is on the lookout for a style which he has not yet found and that his paths of exploration with contradictory appearance, which go from the picture painted on an easel to a form of conceptual art, present no personal identity. This is not the case. His progress has no nonsense about it but possesses, on the contrary, certain unifying principles which we shall try to outline.

Three years at the College of Art of Ontario, one year in Paris where he attends the École des Beaux-Arts without much conviction, to prefer later to hitch-hike through Europe, his return to Montreal in 1962 where he rediscovers in a hospital bed, after ten years of abstention, the joy and the need of creating. A few water-colours, some drawings, will lead him in 1963 toward those oil paintings furrowed by threads of iron like fields of chains which already unconsciously reveal certain structures organization which remind us of bird's eye views. In 1964, small black structured signs on a white background suggest, this time, mock-ups of urban planning as if it were a matter of real

town-planning. Curiously, the following year (without his forgetting his previous research, as we shall see later), Bill Vazan proceeds to hardedge. Large pictures which resemble immense monograms establish illusions of depth by basing themselves on delicate and subtly expressed plays of tonal values.

A definition of art

These geometric works will play a strange rôle in the life and the work of Vazan. These related tonal values will become almost monochromatic. A picture in aluminum colour, for instance, was formed in strong zones by a chromatic inner play to be found at the limits of the possibilities of differentiation of this same aluminum colour. From these pictures, the idea of another possibility of exploration was born by chance, as often occurs in a work of art. While playing with one of his daughters in the sand of Wells Beach, in Maine, he saw her write her name on the beach with a stick. At this moment, in 1967, Bill Vazan knew nothing of land art, which was, incidentally, beginning in the United States. To grasp the idea of external space had always been the essence of his development. On this same beach, he lay down and had himself covered with sand. Upon getting up and seeing the imprint of his body on the beach, he thought: "Why would this not be art?"

Many exterior works in which Vazan took up again the principles of his geometric pictures while dividing expanses of land into zones were created. The only evidence of these works (aside from the work itself) is photography. He fashioned on a beach of the east coast a kind of sculpture in sand which gave the impression of being an immense pitfall. The tide destroyed the work little by little, as the different slides of the artist show. He created in the forest lines of polythene which he called his light lines, where the sun in refraction played gently with this material. At Beaconsfield, he activated space by joining trees between them with many networks of ropes. A red dome made with the sand of Prince Edward Island, by its round form becomes a cultural object combined with natural elements. A single one of these ideas gives rise to tens of other accomplishments which would necessitate, to make a good account, a voluminous monograph.

The history of the world then becomes a perpetual re-creation. The notion of a fleeting quality includes work and man, with a certain wise consciousness of the flight of time, in the successive transformations of the universe. The human being, by this act, is inscribed in cosmic changes. He detaches himself little by little from his old anthropology-centred ideal. The dream, with Bill Vazan, joins the objective ideas of his exterior works. Is not the whole Milky Way or the Galaxy of Andromeda there, buried in the hollow of a handful of sand, inherent in the work and coupled with its antitragic meaning?

The work of Bill Vazan, like that of many of his contemporaries, pursues this incessant struggle against the traditional conception of art. It compounds the vandalism which partly destroyed the Pieta of Michaelangelo. It affirms positively that things do not have to last. However, the characteristics which define the true identity of Vazan remain elsewhere, in these other researches which appear sometimes to enter into contradiction with those which we have just mentioned.

Presence of the line

While Vazan was tracing a parenthesis on one of the beaches of Prince Edward Island on the thirteenth of August, 1969, at the same moment on the west coast of the country another artist, Ian Wallace, was closing the parenthesis. To this gigantic hold on exterior space corresponds the interior grasping which the public had the occasion of seeing at the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal at the time of the *Sondage* exhibition, in 1969, and at the Art Gallery of Ontario, at the end of the following year. The gummed tapes which ran slanting on the floor and the walls created an impression of a fall in space and indefinitely opened the architecture of buildings, somewhat in the manner of Mondrian. Around the island of Montreal, as well as from one ocean to the other, Vazan created focal points by which the lines unified the geographical distance of these places. Finally, on the fifth of March, 1971, the *Ligne mondiale*, which united more than twenty countries, encircled the globe. Between the concept and the actual material, this world line, in the same way as the transcanadian line, is a synthesis of the principal components of Vazan's oeuvre.

In redefining the concept of a work of art, the *Ligne mondiale* takes up again the theme of the first works of Vazan which evolved around an imaginary topography re-created in his pictures of 1963, 1964 and even those of 1972(1); it also resumes this capture of possession created from works of the exterior. The work of art always remains a sign of semi-logical culture. (We shall see as well that with Vazan this sign upholds certain linguistic preoccupations.) All the persons who cooperate in the work — I who am writing this article, for example — become one of its manifestations. The *Ligne mondiale*, by its ecological and geographical overtones, establishes a link between man and nature. All the landscapes through which it passes are seen included in the development of the work, thank to the skill of the man in making a line almost straight, and therefore civilized.

The work of Vazan, with or according to geographical maps, stems directly from this play between nature and culture. The map is in itself another kind of language, another sign, a little like Chinese writing. This archetype of human knowledge which is the map is not necessarily codified with Vazan. Space, atmosphere, light, distance, time are often merged in an empirical way in his achievements. It is there that what I called the linguistic preoccupations of Vazan enter into play, signifying, whether it be the lines or the pictures or the works of the outdoors, and are not always integrated in a map-making fashion in the normal signifying signified relationship. Thus, when Vazan places side by side on a postcard two subway transfers (one taken at the Place des Arts station and the other at the Laurier station eight minutes apart) instead of calculating the geographical angle in degrees as that should be done, he titles his map *8-Minute Angle*. One coded agreement is taken for another. He fixes his space in temporal coordinates as if time and space were one single and the same thing.

The last videographic accomplishment of Vazan, which is titled *Stylo à vue*, takes up this problem again. While filming the city in video, the artist sketches the name of things which he sees, by using space. Here the

signifying and the signified are compared in this combination of language and picture. The *Ligne de vie*(2) is also a part of this space-time juggling of Vazan's research. Each day, since the thirtieth of January, 1970, Vazan sends to Wallace a postcard on which he draws a segment of one inch, until the death of one of the participants. One thinks of the 365 steps of certain Aztec temples and of all these enigmas of the past.

The mystery of the lines of Vazan remains, even if we have tried to distinguish in it some rational conclusions. It resembles those very ancient lines of Nazca in Peru, which seemed to mean nothing when seen from the ground, but which revealed meanings visible only from above. It is toward these heights that the works of Bill Vazan unceasingly lead us. They are a part of this new sensitivity to the playful which is awakening in contemporary man and which is making a wonderful chaos of art.

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

(1) Moreover, it is this work parallel to the creation of easel-painting which makes us respect an internal contradiction in the work of Vazan. The place of creation established a redefinition of the characteristics of the object of art while refuting the traditional limitations in the canvas. While admitting the destruction of the limitations and of the material boundaries in the elaboration of the work, nothing prevents the artist from coming back to more limited space preoccupations. The content of Vazan's recent pictures is in close relation with his topographical tendencies. They are formed of coloured, very short lines (about one inch), placed side by side so as to create zones of the whole similar to weather maps. They are therefore linked to this passion of Vazan for this other line which is the visual presentation of geographical maps and they are preserved in the personal semiology of the artist.

(2) The idea of the *Ligne de vie* arises directly from the experience of Prince Edward Island where, with Wallace in Vancouver, Vazan placed Canada within parentheses.