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## BORN PROVOCATEURS

I hesitated at length before deciding to tackle the following matter. I told myself that I could have sent a letter or article to the newspaper in question, deploring what I had read. But recognizing the intentional provocation in this case, with all it entails, I chose not to wash dirty laundry in front of a readership often *misinformed about the visual arts, not to reinforce the negative image of internal discord and quarrelling that eternally plagues the visual arts community.* It was terribly disappointing to see a "major" daily show so little judgment in this area, to see it allow in grossly misleading remarks implying that creators of present-day art act like petty thieves or unacceptable terrorists or, at best, immature teenagers abusing their haughty power. Far be it from me to oppose the questioning of the system by creators and their works, since this is how art is built. I am well aware that you can't have a revolution without rebellion and that transgressing the status quo keeps society healthy. But I will never adhere to things done or said to the detriment of human values.

Now for the facts. In the Saturday, September 9, 2007, edition of *Le Devoir*, a front-page article by Frédérique Doyon titled "What's become of protest?" quotes a visual artist as saying, in a rather blasé manner, "These days you can't make a more powerful statement than September 11 (2001) ... in an aesthetic and symbolic sense ... after all, it destroyed capitalism." [Translation]

My initial reaction was to wonder, What's the connection between art and lethal terrorism? And what destruction of capitalism is he talking about? Has capitalism disappeared without my noticing? Sorry, but this steps way, way over the line. The mind boggles at so much absurdity expressed in so few words! And what was the specialized journalist thinking – was she naive, complicit, jubilant, terrified? I was bewildered to find this statement in print, and the more I reread it, the more I was taken aback to see such "concepts" in *Le Devoir*.

How could this paper lend itself to trivializing History – real history, whether we like it or not – in this way? And how could it have taken the artist seriously enough to publish his comments? Why not laugh at the Holocaust while you're at it? Imagine the uproar that would cause!

Is this paper so desperate that it has to resort to blatantly cynical headlines and articles? Is cynicism "in" these days? Perhaps, but this is unadulterated, gratuitous provocation. By feeding its readers inanities suggesting that the role or actions of visual artists are criminal or murderous, or that Islamic terrorists are creators of comparable status, *Le Devoir* casts serious doubt on its commitment to ethical journalism. Did it act out of anthropophagic voyeurism? Who knows? I would have expected as much from the less-than-popular artist, who reflects the emptiness, jubilation and cynicism of a society short on values.<sup>2</sup> But I refuse to believe that art is about murders and crimes, and Beauséjour's remarks should have appeared in *Allo Police!*

Can publishing such rubbish be blamed on some desk editor's ignorance? Was this an enormous error of judgment? Whatever the case, I remain convinced that no other artistic field would ever be subjected to such comparisons in this newspaper.

All of this raises a number of recurrent questions, notably the media's distressing incomprehension vis-à-vis the visual arts. Does freedom of the press justify publishing anything and everything? My answer is NO! Thousands of people died on 9/11, in events as tragic as a war. And I repeat, NO! Please, let's not tell ourselves that art and ideology are dead. Or that art is deadly boring. No, I say, NO! Any artist, with or without grants, who makes such statements is a fraud. This time Mathieu Beauséjour has taken his provocative attitude too far. And what dismays me is that no one seems to be reacting. Wake up, people!

Isabelle Lelarge

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> As opposed to the "socially acceptable terrorist action" of the artist collective ATSA (Action Terroriste Socialement Acceptable), which questions society without threatening human life or values.

<sup>2</sup> Obviously, I make no connection between the gravity of the artist's caustic comments and assumptions voiced to *Le Devoir* and his recent exhibition at the Darling Foundry (Montreal). Installing a guillotine as he did there was clearly an act of art, subversion and metaphor, not of falsehood.

THE SPECTATOR  
PARTICIPATORY ART AND CULTURE:  
WHAT DOES IT REQUIRE OF THE  
SPECTATOR?

The concepts of spectacle, spectacularization, spectator, and, of course, the dreadful neologism "spectactor" have been grist for the mills of scientific criticism since the seventies. Numerous theoretical amalgams of feminism, Marxism, semiotics and media studies – to name but a few disciplines – have kneaded and shaped this "viewer's viewpoint," and it goes without saying that the evolution of artistic practices over the past forty years is closely linked to the theoretical concerns. Thus, like the concept of installation, the perceived role and very notion of spectator has undergone radical change. In the Friedland idea, the concept of spectator as universal subject, deeply indebted to Kantian thinking, is utterly untenable today. And the notion of passive beholder is similarly outdated. Current wisdom defines the spectator as embraced in his/her specificity and diversity and consistently engaged in the action. This is the age of participation. Largely stemming from a will to interact with the public, artistic practices involving the audience are ubiquitous in present-day creation. What are we to think of this new, nearly inescapable need for confrontation and co-presence? Is it driven by participatory demagoguery or by a genuine desire to co-create? In these practices designed with a view to reception/perception, how do the notions of catharsis, pleasure, compassion, cruelty, identification and illusion play out? This issue of *ETC* ponders these questions with an in-depth reading of the nature of alliances between artist and audience.

Christine Desrochers

INTELLIGENT BODY  
AND SPECTRAL MIND

"As the century of unbounded curiosity, covetous looking and the de-regulation of the gaze, the twentieth has not been the century of the 'image', as is often claimed, but of optics – and, in particular, of the *optical illusion*."

Paul Virilio

This assertion dates to 1998, but already it appears incomplete when compared to the way art has developed in the twenty-first century. Viewing now seems to be taking a backseat to bodily experience, particularly in the area of new media art. While it is true that art has always been defined as a science of images that evoke and have the power to represent, it is also true that there has been a major paradigm shift in the theory and discourse surrounding it. In the past, the body was perceived as living but immobile matter before a work of art, channelling all of its power into the gaze, which sprang into action and perused the work. The body was the exterior shell of something bigger and invisible happening within it. The real relationship with the work played out mainly in the secret of the individual.

Today, the body is at the forefront. New technologies are making it intelligent. And, in this regard, it is essential that we correctly name the object under discussion. Precisely what, or whom, are we talking about? The word "visitor" has been used in some quarters, but I think we can agree that this skates a bit too close to the marketing craze of the nineties. Others have opted for observer, spectator, receiver, or audience – all terms that suggest the individual's passivity, immobility and physical presence in relation to the work. None of these terms renders the current reality of art using new technologies. To my mind, the word that best translates the new characteristics of the relationship between individual and artwork is "experiencer."

If the accent here is on experiencing the work, it is because new media art seems to have attained a maturity that allows us to recognize that it upends the very definition of artwork and, as a result, the relationship that we *develop* with it.

Not all present-day art is technological art, but it can be agreed that technological art influences the way we experience all forms of art, including the most traditional. The body's now more active function enables us to revisit past art, its presence and reality,

and, especially, our way of entering into contact with it. It is even conceivable that painting and photography, media that result in static images, can be reassessed from the perspective of the body's new stance and function. For, although videography, cinema, installations and, these days, intelligent sculptures that react to human presence are most obvious in soliciting the active involvement of the experiencer's body, they may not be alone. For instance, do we know how our bodies react to certain colours? As I see it, the body now acts as if capable of its own thought, occurring outside of our awareness. Hence, an intelligent body, whose entire surface is engaged with the artwork. The art of Bill Viola offers striking evidence in this regard. Since the eighties, as we know, Viola has been creating works that envelop the experiencer in image and sound, giving the body precedence over the mind. The experience is so intense that our thinking has not yet integrated the newly acquired knowledge. One indication of its nature is the fact that most people exposed to Viola's installations want to relive the experience and report that it has marked them (without being able to say exactly how).

The importance afforded the body in the process of knowledge is mainly attributable to Viola's work. Today, technological advances allow artists to establish parameters that involve the experiencer's body to an even greater degree. For example, the body seems to have developed surprising characteristics. It has a memory; it possesses the ability to synthesize and analyze; in fact, it has a life of its own, independent of its occupant. This approach to the body is similar to that taken in alternative medicine. Building on the notion that a signal sent to the brain as a result of manipulations can change habitual postures, it reveals that the body accumulates experiences, and constructs itself from them.

In art, we now accept that the physical presence of the body in a work is an immaterial presence. The body is there, we see it there, but it is not really there. It gives itself over to a different authority and has a life other than that of the person that inhabits and controls it. It reacts by submitting to rules that it itself creates and as it creates them. It is unpredictable, but significant. Ubiquitous, it is at once art and the object of art. The new body is the creature of the individual who seeks to go beyond. The body is autonomous and solicits an ongoing relationship with the work, a relationship that invites the repeated reliving of the experience. It is the artwork and it is the experiencer. It is positioned independently, at once in the work and outside it. And sometimes, in fact more and more often, the experiencer's body is also the work itself.

But precisely what upheaval does the intelligent body provoke? For a better understanding, it may be helpful to look to Marcel Duchamp, whose vitally important contribution to the art of the sixties and, assuredly, of today is put into perspective in a new biography.<sup>1</sup> According to Duchamp, the artist is a mediumistic being unaware of the process of his creative act. Now, if the artist is, in fact, a medium, what, then, is the status of the individual that Duchamp calls "spectator"? Before answering this question, let us look at the means he proposes for judging a work of art. Duchamp suggests the existence of an element that he defines as the "art coefficient," or the difference between the artist's intention and the result obtained. He adds that, while the coefficient measures the extent to which the intention is realized, it has nothing to do with the "weight of the work on the aesthetic scale," which is determined solely by the spectator.

"The creative act," he says, "is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act."<sup>2</sup>

Thus reassured as to their role in the very existence of the work and by the affirmation of their status, the experiencers assume greater power. They intervene in a work's becoming by reinforcing the idea that the artist and the artwork are merely media or devices that precede its full realization.

It is unlikely that Duchamp grasped the far-reaching scope of this assertion at the time. In demystifying the artist and the artist's work, he created a hierarchy that favours the individual and the individual's experience. He also points out the necessity of time to the qualitative evaluation of art, a historical time that confirms and maintains a work's pertinence or, conversely, consigns it to oblivion and disappearance.

With this theoretical choice, Duchamp places the work of art in a perpetual shift. He weakens it, makes it ephemeral, mutable, with no identity of its own. As a result, he grants the experience the status of artwork, making it central to the definition of art. In other words, without experience, there is no art. The very existence of the artwork depends on the spectator.

These well-known premises are now questioned through interactive and virtual art. The experience of the new art forms,

often created by artist-engineers, raises the question of the experiencer's status: Is there still room for the intelligent body? For an answer, let us look at two works – both aesthetically and conceptually fascinating, one by Marie Chouinard and the other by Lynn Hershman Leeson – to briefly deconstruct their mechanisms and see whether the individual's body prevails over a more rational and conventional approach.

Marie Chouinard is first and foremost a choreographer and dancer, whose work over the past two and a half decades has always played on a unique language of the body. And as a result of her choreographic research, many a spectator has experienced moments of great intensity. Bordering on pure, primal impulse, the energy that Chouinard and her dancers deploy on stage reaches so deep into our hidden, intimate realms that some people find it disturbing. In the interactive work *Cantique 3* (2004), recently presented by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the Daniel Langlois Foundation, Chouinard invites experiencers to trigger the impulse. Using digital keyboards, two people enter into a relationship by manipulating a pair of profiled heads that confront and respond to each other, immodestly lashing their tongues in aggressive dialogue. The body that underlies all of Chouinard's oeuvre, says Jean Gagnon, the exhibition's curator, is "a body which, driven by its own intelligence, is capable of expression and genuineness."<sup>3</sup>

But what intelligence is this? The intelligence that the experiencers bring to the body by interpreting and decoding effects that they trigger, or simply the chance intelligence offered as potential interaction by the computer? Whatever the case, the scowling-faced heads are meaningful and speak to the origin of things: sexual drive, anger, tenderness, eroticism. The notion that the image of the heads renders the meaning of the experiencers' impulses through their movements and the rhythm of the music and gestures is easily grasped: the heads are the gestural translation. And insofar as they throw themselves into the game of exploring expression, the experiencers become part of the work.

On another level, the work of Lynn Hershman Leeson glides between the fictional and the virtual. The recent piece *Life Squared* (2007) reveals to experiencers that, for years now, the artist has been constructing a simulation in which reality and fiction intertwine. The apparent uniqueness of the work lies in the appropriation of virtual space by a fictitious persona whose virtual reality is indisputable, being a construct based on real factors. The experiencer assumes the identity of this "avatar," named Roberta Breitmere, enters her virtual body and, with unexpected but real twists and turns, explores her fictional universe.

Avatars have acquired an awesome reality in our society, and online video gamers are well acquainted with it. It may be that the lives, indeed the identity, of the characters that gamers adopt represent what they themselves cannot live; what is certain is that the virtual body is endowed with an intelligence independent of the person manipulating it. It replaces the experiencer in a universe that the person cannot enter.

Applied to virtual art, the principle of intelligent body is fundamental to the work. The mouse, used to make contact with the virtual world, is the access route into a space where visitors explore without moving, talk without speaking, and understand that they are elsewhere at the same time.

Revisiting the status of the body in the knowledge process introduces new ways of experiencing the artwork. Moreover, the revisited status enhances the balance between mind and matter. It encourages the twenty-first-century individual to appropriate the work so that the art can live on its multiple expressions.

Manon Blanchette

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, trans. Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2000), pp. 28-29. Originally published in French as *La Bombe informatique*, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Marcadé, *Marcel Duchamp* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007), p. 435. Duchamp's reflections on the creative act are available in English translation at <http://members.aol.com/mindwebart3/marcel.htm>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 436.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Gagnon, *e-art*, exhib. cat. (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and Daniel Langlois Foundation, 2007), p. 30. Available online at [www.fondation-langlois.org/e-art/e/](http://www.fondation-langlois.org/e-art/e/)

CURTAIN UP: INTERVIEW WITH  
BRIGITTE HAENTJENS

For this feature dedicated to defining the specificity of today's spectator, we sat down with Quebec stage director Brigitte Haentjens – recipient of the Siminovitch Prize in Theatre and the National Theatre School's Gascon-Thomas Award in 2007 – to get her thoughts on and expectations of theatre audiences.

**Isabelle LeLARGE:** *What type of theatre do you create, and how long have you been doing it?*

**Brigitte Haentjens:** I began actively working in theatre in 1977 and went through various stages. For fifteen years, in French-speaking Ontario, I concentrated on playbuilding, collective creations and new plays by Franco-Ontarian writers, such as Jean-Marc Dalpé. Later, around 1989-90, I moved to Montreal, where I spent three years in a more institutional setting as artistic director of Théâtre Denise Pelletier. I directed several repertory plays there, but also at Espace GO, TNM and elsewhere. At the time, my style was fairly traditional, but after leaving Théâtre Denise Pelletier I adopted a much more radical approach. Sibyllines, the company that I founded, presents almost nothing but contemporary work based on literary or theatre texts.

**I. L.:** *What's the difference between the two?*

**B. H.:** A play has characters, a story, an intrigue, situations and, especially, dialogue. What interests me more and more are texts that leave lots of room for the staging. I tend to choose literary material, adaptations of novels, poetic texts. But not exclusively, of course.

My work has also evolved significantly in formal terms. And I'm the producer now, which gives me lots of artistic elbowroom. If I want to work with fifty actresses, I'm free to do so, provided I plan for and make other sacrifices. This situation obviously changes the nature of the projects, but also the nature of my contact with the actors and designers. It also allows me to oversee the image, the news releases, the posters and the visual material.

What I'm passionate about is contemporary theatre. Because of my education and training, I'm attracted more by European than by North American intellectual and cultural considerations.

I also favour theatre that expresses a feminine point of view, but that doesn't mean militant theatre (I'm not on any soapbox). I enjoy staging what women have to say, I like to deal with questions about femininity, about the relationship between art and the feminine.

**I. L.:** *Who makes up the intended audience for this material?*

**B. H.:** I don't know precisely who they are. In Montreal, there are three to four thousand people interested in plays that some media call "demanding," which I guess means not primarily aimed at entertaining.

I'd be hard put to qualify "my" typical spectator: I can see and feel that the audience is made up of educated people who appreciate art and literature. I also see many young people attending my shows. But for reasons I can't really explain, some shows have taken off like wildfire in terms of audience.

**I. L.:** *Which ones?*

**B. H.:** For *Tout comme elle*, and for *La cloche de verre*, we brought in about 13,000 people.

**I. L.:** *Maybe because they wanted to see Céline Bonnier on stage?*

**B. H.:** Céline Bonnier was already widely known for her work in theatre, as well as in films and on television. Part of the audience undoubtedly came for her, for her outstanding performance. And since *La Cloche de verre* [based on *The Bell Jar*] told a story, people could identify to a certain extent. This was not the case with Heiner Müller's *Médée-matériel* [*Medea Material*], for example, where the text is more intellectual, more cerebral, with numerous complex references.

**I. L.:** *The fact that La Cloche de verre is set in the 1950s may have had an influence, since this was a crucial period for Quebec.*

**B. H.:** Any number of factors contributed to the success of *La Cloche de verre*. You can always analyze them afterwards, but just before the opening I felt sure that no one would be interested! *Tout comme elle*, a show with 50 actresses and a text by Louise Dupré, was also a huge success. This was largely because it was an event, with so many actresses of all ages and different experience on stage. And it worked, even though the text was poetic and dealt with a painful subject.

**I. L.:** *Do you work with a specific public in mind?*

**B. H.:** No. I don't think about the audience until the day before the opening! For me, the important thing is the artistic voice, the

urgency of what there is to say, and how we want to convey it. I'm available to the audience every night, because I never miss a performance. But performers are not teachers. They shouldn't have to clarify or explain a play from the stage at the same time they're acting. Our role is to express a point of view, to present a work. The audience is very important to me, but not as part of the artistic process.

On the other hand, I try to facilitate the public's connection with the play. For example, we produce in-depth, informative programs based on extensive research (they are written by Stéphane Lépine), and we hold talkback sessions with the audience.

**I. L.:** *After the performance?*

**B. H.:** Yes, these sessions are very fulfilling, very gratifying. They enrich the artistic experience for everyone. Artistic education and artistic dialogue are lacking in our society. Then again, art needs to maintain some mystery. When you go see a painting, you don't always understand it, at least not right away, and that's not a problem. Art does not exist to forge consensual reactions.

**I. L.:** *Are you puzzled by the general absence of male theatre-goers?*

**B. H.:** Yes, I find it puzzling. And frankly catastrophic! What's going to happen in 20 years when the only cultivated people are women? What will they be able to talk about with the men they share their lives with? Also, I see a certain male sectarianism; during the run of *Tout comme elle*, I heard comments from men like "mother/daughter relationships don't interest me." It's the story of their mother, their sister, their girlfriend, and yet they say it doesn't concern them. I don't get it, because men's concerns interest me, interest us. Repertory plays from Sophocles to Shakespeare reflect practically nothing but masculine concerns!

In Quebec, 75% of all theatre-goers are women, whereas in Europe, men continue to account for a good portion. European culture is still dominated by the masculine system. It's a more patriarchal, more macho society. Most of the people you hear from are men. Here, women read, they consume literature; they go to the theatre, visit museums. Women go out together and talk together. And women watch soap operas!

**I. L.:** *They're busy!*

**B. H.:** You wouldn't believe how much they get done in a day!

**I. L.:** *How do you decide which play to choose?*

**B. H.:** It's an ongoing process; I can't really tell you how it's organized or structured. I always have three or four projects on my mind, and then at a certain point the line-up for the next few years becomes clear: what we'll do when, before or after what. It's a work in permanent progress.

I don't have enough time to do everything I would like to. Life is too short. At the moment, I have three projects in the works. For March 2008, there's *Blasté* [*Blasted*], by Sarah Kane, a British playwright who wrote five plays before killing herself at the age of 27. It's very violent theatre, with rough language and situations. The play deals with subjugation in the intimate sphere and how it can project itself into the public sphere. It analyses the mechanism of the war of the sexes, and of war in general. It's simultaneously magnificent and terrible. I'm also working on another project, with dancers and actors; I want to focus on the city, in a more direct, more political piece. I think the title will be *Montréal centre-ville*, but I don't know what it's going to look like. Plus I've started work on Büchner's *Woycek*, a workshop with Anne-Marie Cadieux. Not to mention the productions we're remounting!

**I. L.:** *When you choose a play, do you immediately think of the cast?*

**B. H.:** I frequently choose my projects for actors. I imagine a particular actor. And I've often abandoned a project when the actor I had in mind couldn't or wouldn't do it. I've been fortunate to work with outstanding performers, and I'm quite loyal to my casts.

**I. L.:** *So considering the audience is not at all important?*

**B. H.:** The only way to consider the audience is in physical, material terms in relation to the show. In other words, the way people are placed in the theatre, their position in relation to the stage, the route they take from the box office to their seat. For a long time I put on shows in places that are not theatrical venues, odd places. And places like that become sets. I put on *La Nuit juste avant les forêts* [*The Night Just Before the Forests*], with James Hyndman, in a corridor above the Lion d'Or. And *Hamlet-machine* at the Union Française. The audience had to go through the kitchen to get to the room!

**I. L.:** *I understand. For me it's very important to feel that I'm physically integrated with the play. As opposed to, say, advertising posters in theatres, which bother me.*

**B. H.:** Yes, or a car on the stage. That totally confuses the communication. It's like going to a theatre named for a tobacco company or watching a show on a stage named for a brand of beer.

**I. L.:** *You mean you would refuse that sort of invasive sponsorship?*

**B. H.:** In any case, I don't think that the type of expression I favour or the type of research I do interests beer companies!

**I. L.:** Well, that settles the problem, and that's the price of freedom.

**B. H.:** Yes, the price of freedom.

**I. L.:** Some people working in the visual arts have no idea that participatory street theatre is nothing new. It makes me wonder.

**B. H.:** Performance, a forgotten tradition. As far as I'm concerned, the whole spectator-actor business makes me shudder. It's very troubling.

**I. L.:** Troubling for the plays?

**B. H.:** Yes, plays can be drained of their meaning by this notion. More and more, the only thing that counts is quantitative communication, the number of spectators a show draws. It's true that you have to be in shape to go to the theatre, it's a demanding art, and that's true of art in general. Making believe that all things are equal, that there's no difference between taking in a comedy routine and going to see a play, that everything is consumed the same way, is just plain wrongheaded. Art requires thought, and presence.

In the same way, it doesn't make much sense to judge the work of a beginner and that of a mature artist as if they were equally important, giving them the same number of lines in the paper.

Today, there's a dominant discourse that stems from a sort of cheap artistic democratization. It's a tactic that helps not to develop audiences but to grow consumers. Instead of providing real artistic education, everything seems to focus on informing consumers, on letting them know *whether they're going to get their money's worth*.

In the media, this discourse discredits the role and contribution of intellectuals, and thus of artists. The whole antielitist slant conveyed in the media, for example on Radio-Canada (which never misses an opportunity to caution that something is "accessible," or "difficult") is aimed at making art into mush for the masses, all-dressed pizza. This is the age of celebrity, of celebritization, where people have the impression that anyone can do anything.

The success of reality shows stems from a society that pretends that everything is equivalent, that everybody can achieve fame. For instance, reality shows compete with drama and imply that what counts is getting in the newspaper or on TV: showing yourself nude in a hot tub or playing a recognized major role carries almost the same weight in the media!

**I. L.:** Ultimately, is this a form of participation?

**B. H.:** Yes, it's thinking that spectators and performers are the same thing, that everyone is equal. We're living in the age of rights and freedoms, and MY right takes precedence. The public wants the same rights and privileges as the performers. I'm not saying that being an actor is better than being a labourer or an executive, or a doctor or nurse, I'm saying that it's different.

**I. L.:** Does it show a lack of respect for artists?

**B. H.:** It's also a way of denying the complexity of things.

**I. L.:** By trivializing them?

**B. H.:** Society absolutely wants everyone to have the right to do everything. You can paint and write and perform in your spare time, that's fine, and even important. But it's not the same as making it your life's work.

**I. L.:** So the problem is society's lack of critical judgment?

**B. H.:** The critical discourse has practically disappeared from newspapers. It's the capitalist method applied to art. Brainwashing. Today, movies are launched like dishwashing products.

**I. L.:** Can audiences participate without manifesting it?

**B. H.:** Yes, of course.

**I. L.:** Does it have to be imperceptible?

**B. H.:** I think that participation is something you feel; what each person feels in respect to a play is mysterious and secret. Audiences are not often asked to participate in the creation process, they are presented with a finished work, something that is not perfect but presented nonetheless.

Unlike other arts, theatre needs this encounter with the public to exist, the public is active in the performance.

Also, I believe that what really counts is not how many people you reach (although that counts) but the fact that every individual touched by a work becomes a social catalyst.

**I. L.:** Is it the intimate aspect of your plays that allows viewers to identify with them? Is the notion of identifying with the characters or the story important to you?

**B. H.:** When I'm working on a show, I'm the first viewer. At very least, I have to be able to identify with it.

**I. L.:** Is an emotional investment required of the viewer?

**B. H.:** Absolutely. Viewers bring something concrete to the performance. Their investment, or their indifference.

**I. L.:** Wasn't *Tout comme elle* a play that made people cry?

**B. H.:** Yes, but it also offered a lot of joy.

**I. L.:** So reaching the broadest audience is not your primary concern?

**B. H.:** No! But at the same time I can feel when things aren't working.

**I. L.:** Have you done plays that haven't worked?

**B. H.:** Yes, you feel it, when it's too difficult, too avant-garde for the time, the place, the space-time.

**I. L.:** Meaning that each week fewer and fewer people enjoy the play?

**B. H.:** No, not necessarily, it's more subtle than that. Sometimes you can feel things stalling. It also depends on the media, the critics, at least it used to. I don't think critics have the same impact today as they had back when Robert Lévesque was writing for *Le Devoir*. When it came to so-called difficult plays, his reviews weighed heavily with the public. For plays that are more avant-garde or require more referents, the public may need guarantees before buying a ticket. Exploratory work, so to speak, needs the support of intellectual and critical discourse.

**I. L.:** What's more important: audience success or critical success?

**B. H.:** For a demanding, more or less radical production, the support of the critics is very important. To the extent that my work is relatively marginal, it's a lot harder to attract people without critical support. That's the way society works. We are all very sensitive to success, of course, even if we won't admit it. Success reassures, failure disheartens.

**I. L.:** Was casting Roy Dupuis for your next play, by Sarah Kane, a matter of contradiction, or of challenge? How do you get such a well-known actor to play such a difficult, unappealing role?

**B. H.:** Roy Dupuis deserves credit for choosing projects of this sort, and for lending his name to a play by Sarah Kane. Roy and I are friends from way back, and we've worked together on some fine projects. In this case, we obviously hope that people will come not just on account of his reputation but knowing what the play is about. But you can't control everything! I'm always happy when there are crowds in the theatre, a packed house delights me. It's comforting, and reassuring. I don't go to all this effort just to generate a minor impact.

**I. L.:** Isn't this a triumph over reason? It seems to me that working with popular actors is like an unconscious strategy on your part. Masking their charisma has to be a physical and psychological feat.

**B. H.:** I have had, and still have, the good fortune to work with exceptional actors: Marc Béland, Céline Bonnier, Anne-Marie Cadieux, James Hyndman, Sylvie Drapeau, Sébastien Ricard. But also Gaétan Nadeau, Annie Berthiaume, Marie-Claude Langlois and many others less well known to the public. I love actors who dare, who engage.

**I. L.:** Let's get back to how you address your audiences. Do you use affect as a strategy. I know the word "strategy" may disturb you, but the fact is that you work on the basis of the audience's emotions, and that's a powerful stance. Strategy is even a commercial term, in the sense of spectacular value. Some might say that yours is sensationalist theatre, the way we talk about sensationalist cinema.

**B. H.:** The way I see it, I stage what I want to see at the theatre, what I need as a spectator in order to be affected.

**I. L.:** But when you appeal to affect, aren't you likely to impede the viewer's critical judgment?

**B. H.:** As Heiner Müller says, "Ideas inflict wounds on the body." I believe that one doesn't prevent the other; you can be transfixed by ideas. That said, it's clear that I use actors as vibrant vehicles of voice, but I think that voice and intellect are a key factor in our case.

**I. L.:** Set design is also of capital importance in integrating the spectator. I thoroughly enjoyed your production of *L'Eden cinéma*, by Marguerite Duras, and I was bowled over by Anick La Bissonnière's set, with its wide angles and garish colours. Does the set designer read the play, immerse herself in what it has to say?

**B. H.:** Anick is also an architect, and she approaches space the way an architect does. She reads and documents each project extensively. We consult art books, and sometimes we travel. For example, for *L'Eden cinéma* we went to Vietnam.

**I. L.:** Do you take colour into consideration?

**B. H.:** Every experience is unique in some way. For *La cloche de verre*, we began with the image of an installation revealing someone behind sheets of a translucent material.

For *L'Eden cinéma*, we worked like crazy, from four or five maquettes that never quite satisfied us. Finding the right way to organize the space was very difficult. With each play, the creation comes together little by little, in an ongoing process of work and dialogue, and visual art plays an important part.

**I. L.:** How does your set designer influence the viewer's psychological feelings?

**B. H.:** The set design tells you what the play is about right up front. I like to have the audience encompassed in the space, and I like to alter people's perception, to create a condition that facilitates their contact with the play.

Interview conducted by Isabelle Lelarge on August 17, 2007

"Those who do not play along, and that's as much to say, those who do not swim bodily in the stream of human beings, become afraid of missing the bus and drawing the revenge of the collective down on themselves, rather like entering a totalitarian party all too late. Pseudoactivity is a re-insurance ... the expression of preparation for self-sacrifice, in which alone one has an inkling of a guarantee of self-preservation."<sup>1</sup>

Theodor Adorno

The nineteen-nineties saw the development of participatory practices mediated by installations that mimetically represented conditions of everyday life – those of the artist or of some generic place (Rirkrit Tiravanija) – by means of devices in which viewers prompted pictorial events by triggering the appropriate mechanism (Angela Bulloch), or invitations to exhibition visitors to share their photographs and memories (Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster), or even empathetic communion with the artist's friends and family, living or dead (the "portrait" series by Felix Gonzalez-Torres). According to Nicolas Bourriaud, an emerging art critic at the time and coiner of the "relational aesthetics" label that unites these artists, this phenomenon was supported and motivated by a concept of the viewer as an alienated subject, constantly undergoing mercantile reification in his/her relationship with objects and other subjects, all of them incapable of or cut off from experiences other than those mediated by the dominant channels of mass communication. As the artist Daniel Dezeuze mockingly puts it, these devices were supposed to administer some sort of relational therapy to the subject who, "like the laboratory rat" is "doomed to an inexorable itinerary in its cage, littered with chunks of cheese" and "reduced to the condition of a consumer of time and space."<sup>2</sup>

This therapeutic mission was intended for "micro communities" made up of viewers engaged in the devices and thought to experience the restoration of social connections through techniques that I, with Amar Lakel, term "pastoral"<sup>3</sup> – communion, confession, message board – in order to underscore the latent, if not explicit, religiosity of certain such devices and the discourses that legitimized them.<sup>4</sup> Thus defined and seen from France, this mission was a sign of the times – Jacques Chirac had campaigned for the 1995 presidential election on the theme of mending the "fractured society." It also corresponded in part to the cultural mediation policies adopted by exhibition institutions (museums, art centres, regional contemporary art funds), which favoured its dissemination, adoption and legitimization.<sup>5</sup> One consequence was to partially displace the mediating mission of these institutions. The objective was no longer to mediate between viewers and works of art (role of the institution and its mediators), or to exhibit works of a pedagogical and critical nature, mediative of themselves and of aesthetic matters in general (for example, the deconstructive practices of Daniel Buren, Art & Language or minimalism, institutionally integrated in the seventies and eighties), but to create devices that mediate between the subjects themselves, art as institution and the community to be restored in the name of a lost mythic totality.

This displacement denotes a, if not redemptive then at least magic, conception of art, to which has fallen the role of re-enchanting the world and the daily life of alienated, separated and disenchanted subjects in times of crisis. In fact, since the turn of the century, this conception has dominated public policy and mass representations of art, as well as numerous artistic creations produced by the relational generation. Today, its focus is less on participative processes – although they have not disappeared – than on reviving the synaesthetic models of early modernity (linking colours, sounds and sensations<sup>6</sup>), as seen in the technological development of viewer capture and immersion devices and the return of the kinetic-cybernetic ideology (interaction, dynamogeny, computable concept of the brain, feedback theory, etc.). One example is Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's *Cosmodrome*, presented in 2003 at the Lyons Biennale and this year in her large solo exhibition *Expodrome*, at the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris. This light show simulates the optical, tactile and auditory sensations of an imaginary journey that is programmed in the space and takes viewers into a contemplative state. Another is *Dream House*, by La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela (1990), an environment featuring magenta light (a blend of hot and cold favouring psychophysiological equilibrium, according to the therapeutic precepts of certain synaesthesia-related issues) and a sustained low-pitched sound believed to be conducive

to mediation. At the 2005 Lyons Biennale, it was located at the end of the show, in the Sucrière building, where visitors entered after taking off their shoes. Still another, seen at the same Biennale, is Brian Eno's *Quiet Club* (2004), composed of coloured light projected on suspended diamond shapes accompanied by atmosphere music and presented by the artist as resembling an ideal discotheque, "where people could relax in pleasant company, in a sensual, welcoming and not-too-noisy environment that encourages creative thinking."<sup>7</sup>

Along with these contemplative and meditative escapist devices designed to offer kitsch spiritual band-aids while physically plumbing the subjects, the return of cybernetic models has fostered the development of works that are more dynamogenic, in the sense that their show of movement stimulates the viewer's physical movement. This is the case with the spectacular spiralling slides created by Carsten Höller for the vast Turbine Hall at London's Tate Modern (*Test Site*, 2006). Here, the accent is on delight, play and a techno-participative aesthetic, but this trend cohabits smoothly with that of immersive passivity. And both these trends, as well as the untechnological relational form, cohabit with another: the inclination to post-Pop environments that combine signs (audio and visual) derived from mass-culture industries and reified repertoires of modernism and design. These cohabitations are facilitated by the practices of Gonzalez-Foerster, Höller and Pierre Huyghe (whose 2002 *L'expédition scintillante, comédie musicale en trois actes* answers to the contemplative escapist aesthetic<sup>8</sup>) and by Bourriaud's theoretical and curatorial evolution towards the promotion of great cultural mixes (his book *Postproduction*, in 2001, and the exhibition *Playlist* at the Palais de Tokyo, in 2004) as contemplative, immersive and celebratory paradigms (2005 Lyons Biennale, 2006 Nuit Blanche Paris).

The valuing of these trends reflects the utilitarian and instrumental evolution of public art policy for the purposes of organizing leisure activities, celebrating social connections, and ensuring urban promotion and re-enchantment. In Lille, for instance, the local authorities and elites are delighted to have bet on art as a communicational force, having seen the city's reputation enhanced by the flurry of artistic events marking the 2004 Cultural Capital celebrations.<sup>9</sup> Every one of the art trends mentioned here was represented: the festive neo-Pop of Kusama's monumental flower pot near the Euralille train station and the exhibition *Flower Power* at Palais Rameau, designer Patrick Jouin's pink re-enchantment of the glass roof at the Lille-Flanders station, etc. The intended combined effect of these initiatives, as publicly announced by the organizers, was to make the city unrecognizable to its residents, to make the residents viewers of a re-enchanting quotidian. Seen from France, this situation, now a model for cities aspiring to become European cultural capitals or importing the Nuit Blanche format (Brussels, Rome, Shanghai, Madrid, Montreal, Toronto, Naples, Tel-Aviv, Riga and even Gaza), stems from the "mobilising and profitable" concept of culture "in times of crisis" preached in 1983 by Jack Lang, who stated that "only the notion of culture has begun to take hold as a way to globally solve the problems of all humankind."<sup>10</sup> As François Cusset sees it, this "vitalist" concept of culture, handed down by André Malraux, is, in fact, synonymous with a "formidable industrialization of culture"<sup>11</sup> and an alignment of both (public and private) cultural operators and product offerings with the economic imperatives of financial and symbolic profitability. Thus, Nuit Blanche and the Fête des lumières in Lyons are in evident continuity, as regards the visual arts, with the diverse events devoted to music, film or books since the eighties.

At the same time, the visual arts are undergoing a process of standardization, due to the growing industrialization of exhibition institutions. Even artwork formats are being adapted to this evolution, a move decried by Rosalind Krauss in 1990<sup>12</sup> and hailed by Thierry Raspail, founder and art director of the Lyons Biennale, at a conference at Beaubourg in 2002.<sup>13</sup> This implies a quantitative conception of a work's qualitative value based on its size, production cost and purchase price.<sup>14</sup> And so, just as cities bank on art to enhance their position vis-à-vis the international competition (to attract businesses, capital, new residents, tourists, etc.), the many museums and biennales that have sprung up around the world in the past twenty years promote their worth and differentiate themselves by advertising dimensions and quantities; and all of them (cities, museums, biennales) favour the production, acquisition and/or dissemination of cultural products and artistic devices consistent with the scope of their industrial ambitions.

Once again, the result has been a displacement. Even though the discourse of subjects mediating between themselves, called upon to restore themselves in relations with the/their community is still present in the promotional operations of events like the various

Nuit Blanche and Lille 2004, these events are driven solely by economic aspirations and contribute to the increasingly stringent control of our societies, which is facilitated by the religiosity and the bonding and emotional dimension of such devices.<sup>15</sup> Nowadays, the celebration of community equates to the theatrical celebration of a common denominator – the consumption of merchandise and mass-oriented industrial signs – and the subjects' shared aesthetic aspirations: to identify with rosy optimistic entities, to project themselves into fairytale images and situations, to be amazed and stimulated by dizzying, dynamogenic devices. It appears that the neo-neo-avant-garde aspirations – the emancipation, however minutely utopian, of subjects alienated by the "society of the spectacle" – expressed by Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* have been totally left behind, indeed forgotten, in favour of the active participation of artists in the industrial standardization of art and the aesthetic affects that they dispense.

The result is a "Disneylandification" of public spaces and of art, synonymous with a benevolent, optimistic and jolly mock metabolization of undesirable feelings and living conditions.<sup>16</sup> Viewers are considered customers, passive or participating consumers of programmed experiences apt to occasionally relieve their depression, their sense of loss of meaning and social connection. True, according to Bourriaud's portrayal of the "lambda" subject, consuming reified aesthetic experiences as a remedy for the even sadder reification of social relationships in everyday work and home life. This marketing conception of experience underlies the development of mediated sublimated-consumption technologies (the re-enchantment of consumption thanks to interactive marketing) using emotion-control strategies that are shared by the citizen-control devices found in Nuit Blanche and other events.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the things criticized and battled by the avant-gardes (reification, kitsch and aestheticization of the political) and, when Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* came out, by certain neo-avant-gardes already seeing the dominant art (kinetic art and New Realism) reflect a techno-participative and consumption/leisure society-celebrative ideology.<sup>18</sup> Deuze offered this ironic view in 1967: "bathing in the 'cultural,' (the artist) will administer puppet theatres and 'sensitivity centres' ... And who could resist mounting the horses of this dizzying merry-go-round: social responsibility, intervention in popular culture, triumphant teaching of the vates, so-called edifier of the masses, proud to at last see one's inner calling coincide with the exercise of a worthwhile function?"<sup>19</sup> This evolution thus supposes a reversal of the avant-gardes' emancipative aims and their theoretical bases, since the first critics of reification – contemporaries perpetuating Marxist theory<sup>20</sup> (to whom Bourriaud refers in *Formes de vie*, 1999) – rose up against any form of religiosity or effort to assimilate art to magic. And all the more so since these dimensions have always accompanied the formidable aestheticization of the political and the processes of reifying affects and percepts in the cultural industries.<sup>21</sup> The critical failure that this signals exonerates itself by arguing the inevitable nature of reification (the only avenue open to the "tenants of culture," as Bourriaud describes artists in *Postproduction*, is to achieve "modest connections"), which is to say, the utilitarian and commercial reduction of everything, including art, in a capitalistic society presented without alternative. The self-reification<sup>22</sup> – not to say submissive mindset and opportunism – of the artists of re-enchantment is equalled only by their disdain for the subject/viewer. Viewers are invariably presumed to be passive, incapable of experience (in terms of qualitative gains of knowledge, of estrangement versus escapism). Worse yet, their perceptions and affects are seen to be dominated by quantitative appraisal (What do I get out of it?) and projective identification (Does this artwork metabolize my undesirable feelings in a positive way?).<sup>23</sup> And obviously it is this monster that has to be sated, this "lambda citizen," this "average recipient" to whom responsibility for the evolution is bravely attributed. Such panache!

Tristan Trémeau

#### Endnotes

- Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (aphorism 91). Originally published in German, 1951. Quoted here from the translation by Dennis Redmond, 2005: [www.efn.org/~dredmond/MM2.html](http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/MM2.html)
- N. Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002), pp. 8-9. Originally published in French as *Esthétique relationnelle*, 1998.
- A. Lakel and T. Trémeau, "Le tournant pastoral de l'art contemporain," paper delivered at the conference L'art contemporain et son exposition, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, October 2002. Text available at [www.mickfinch.com/links.htm](http://www.mickfinch.com/links.htm)
- See Bourriaud's frequent references to sociologist Michel Maffesoli's theory of reliance and re-enchantment, developed in *La contemplation du monde. Figures du style communautaire* (Paris: Grasset, 1993) and *Le réenchantement*

*du monde* (Paris: La Table ronde, 2007), and my review "Réenchantement, disent-ils," *L'art même*, no. 35 (2007; downloadable at [www2.cfwb.be/lartmeme/ram001.htm](http://www2.cfwb.be/lartmeme/ram001.htm)).

- See my article "L'artiste médiateur," *Art Press*, no. 22 (special issue "Écosystèmes du monde de l'art," 2001), pp. 52-57.
- At the same time, these synaesthetic models were subjected to theoretical re-evaluation and historical positioning in conjunction with major exhibitions, notably in Paris: *Aux origines de l'abstraction 1800-1914* (Musée d'Orsay, 2003), *Sons et lumières* (Musée National d'Art Moderne Centre Georges Pompidou, 2004). On the re-evaluation of kineticism, discussed later, see *L'œil moteur, art optique et cinétique, 1950-1975*, exhib. cat. (Strasbourg: Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain, 2005).
- Quoted in French in *Expérience de la durée*, exhib. cat. (Lyons: Lyons Biennale, 2005), p. 130.
- This was an imaginary voyage in Antarctica, complete with snow, ice and fog (Kunsthau Bregenz, 2002).
- "We won fifteen years of high profile: all of Europe now knows that Lille is a city that counts" (Laurent Dréano, General Coordinator, Lille 2004); "The region's business leaders feel this renown every day and are glad to see the city's 'grey' image dispelled" (Bruno Bonduelle, President, Chamber of Commerce). Both quotes are from the article "Lille porté par son label bien après 2004," *Le Monde*, September 9-10, 2007. The Lille 3000 program is playing out every second year – Phase 1 took place in 2006 (Bombaysers) – to reduce the risks of post-coital trauma for residents and, especially, for the project's managers ([www.lille3000.com](http://www.lille3000.com)).
- Jack Lang, at a two-day session on creation and development at the Sorbonne, February 1983, quoted in F. Cusset, *La décennie. Le grand cauchemar des années 1980* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006), p. 80. This book casts a finely critical eye on the triumph of liberal, communicational and reactionary ideologies in the eighties.
- Ibid.*, p. 329.
- R. Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum," *October*, no. 54 (fall 1990), pp. 3-17.
- L'art contemporain et son exposition, conference held at Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, October 2002.
- At this conference, Thierry Raspail pointed to several installations that the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon had acquired under his direction and whose importance he measured in terms of the cubic meters of storage space they required.
- On this point I subscribe to the analysis of M. Jimenez, who affirms that such events, "in an increasingly controlled society and like soccer" can become "a privileged instrument for manipulating the masses." Paper delivered at a seminar at the University of Sapienza, Rome, May 2006, quoted by B. Stiegler and Ars industrialis, in *Réenchanter le monde* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), p. 46.
- As one Disney designer says in a 1975 company handbook, "What we create is a 'Disney Realism,' sort of Utopian in nature, where we carefully program out all the negative, unwanted elements and program in the positive elements. We create a world they [visitors] can escape to ... to enjoy for a few brief moments ... a world that is the way they would like to think it would be." Quoted in the excellent article by Sébastien Pluot, "Mind controlled). Fantômes télépathiques et sur-connexions technologiques : entre critique et célébration des stratégies d'emprise" (*Trouble*, no. 6, 2006), in which the writer critiques the ideological bases of the community celebration device constructed by Pierre Huyghe in his film *Streamside Day* (2003), partly inspired by the conformist vision of Disney's American society and social control strategies.
- The very concept of device implies a notion of control and program, excluding any use not incorporated into it beforehand. See G. Agamben, *Qu'est-ce qu'un dispositif?* (Paris: Rivages, 2007).
- In his notes on participative art, Pierre Restany, author of the New Realism manifesto (1960) and member of all ministerial cabinets under Jacques Chaban-Delmas (participation advocate), calls for the development of "an exploratory aesthetic related to the fundamental problems of total art, psychosensory communication and the organization of space" (1971). At the time, the same aspirations were seen in the cybernetic theories of Frank Popper, champion of kinetic art.
- D. Deuze, *Textes et notes 1967-1988* (Paris: ENSBA, 1991).
- The concept of reification was first theorized by Georg Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972).
- See all writings by Theodor Adorno beginning with *On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening* (1938).
- Self-reification: to consider oneself a commodity, a thing. See A. Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). These essays were originally delivered as Tanner Lectures by Honneth at University of California, Berkeley, in March 2005, available at [www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/Honneth\\_2006.pdf](http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/Honneth_2006.pdf)
- See E. Dem and T. Trémeau, "L'art allégé des œuvres. L'œuvre d'art, son spectateur, son aura et ses experts," *L'art même*, no. 25 (2004), pp. 6-11.

## RÉACTIONS DIFFÉRÉES : ATSA ET PAYSAGES ÉPHÉMÈRES

En 1987, Krzysztof Wodiczko a formulé une des critiques les plus concises de l'« art dans les lieux publics » en tant que forme de légitimation politique. Il soutenait que l'art public devait s'engager dans des défis stratégiques dénonçant l'exploitation économique et psychopolitique de la cité<sup>1</sup>. Décrivant l'œuvre de la nouvelle avant-garde comme une intelligence critique, il proposait aux institutions de diffusion massive de l'information et de la culture une collaboration critique, afin de gagner du temps et de l'espace et d'éveiller les consciences.

Parmi les créations d'art public à l'échelle de la cité les plus réussies de cette période, mentionnons *Chambres d'amis*, un événement organisé à Gand en 1986, auquel ont collaboré plus de 50 artistes, ainsi que *Skulptur Projekte*, un projet qui incluait plus de 70 interventions dans la ville de Münster, en 1987, et *Places with a Past*, une série d'installations propres aux lieux du Festival Spoleto de Charleston, en 1991. Suivant Johanne Lamoureux, ce qui caractérise ce genre de projets, c'est en partie le fait qu'ils prenaient leurs distances par rapport à l'idée d'une spécificité du lieu pour s'intéresser plutôt au temps de l'événement qui avait lieu et au temps que les visiteurs mettaient pour se rendre d'un lieu d'exposition à un autre<sup>2</sup>. Abordant le type d'activité de consommation qui entre en jeu dans ces festivals artistiques à l'échelle de la cité, Johanne Lamoureux décrit l'appel aux motifs pittoresques du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle et à la flânerie du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle comme des traits caractéristiques d'une muséologisation de la cité<sup>3</sup>. Pour sa part, Miwon Kwon considère que ces œuvres font partie d'une transformation des activités axées sur le lieu : les préoccupations phénoménologiques et la critique institutionnelle sont délaissées au profit d'une appréhension discursive du site. Étant discursivement déterminé, le site se transforme en « séquence fragmentaire d'événements et d'actions dans l'espace [...] une narration nomade dont le chemin s'articule autour du passage de l'artiste. »<sup>4</sup> La récupération de la forme externe de tels projets est devenue courante dans les années 90. C'est ainsi qu'un projet de ce genre a été élaboré par le groupe ATSA, un organisme à but non lucratif créé en 1997, en vue de créer des « œuvres d'interventions urbaines sous forme d'installations, de performances ou de mises en scène réalistes faisant foi des aberrations sociales, environnementales et patrimoniales ». L'ATSA ou *Action Terroriste Socialement Acceptable* se donne pour mandat de questionner le paysage urbain et de redonner à la place publique sa dimension citoyenne d'espace politique ouvert aux discussions et aux débats de société. ATSA prône une vision non hermétique de l'activisme artistique qui laisse une place au « développement durable de la société »<sup>5</sup>. Le groupe s'est surtout fait connaître jusqu'à maintenant par son projet intitulé *FRAG sur la Main* (2002), une série de 32 compositions graphiques installées à différents emplacements sur le boulevard Saint-Laurent, dit également « la Main ». Ce parcours visuel témoigne des différents courants qui ont marqué l'histoire sociale, culturelle et économique du boulevard Saint-Laurent, ainsi que de personnalités connues qu'on associe à l'esprit de ce lieu. Un projet similaire d'art urbain éphémère a récemment été réalisé par Paysages éphémères sur l'avenue du Mont-Royal. Paysages éphémères décrit ses projets comme des « interventions urbaines » conçues pour « surprendre et amuser les citoyens »<sup>6</sup>. Dans le groupe des gagnants du concours 2007, la seule pièce réussie était *21 visages en tête*, créée par l'équipe des architectes Brière, Gilbert + associés. Imitant la nouvelle tactique du graffiti au pochoir, consistant à utiliser les trottoirs comme surfaces à peindre, le projet présente les visages de 21 personnages historiques qui ont donné leur nom aux rues qui longent l'avenue du Mont-Royal : Berri, Mentana, Fabre, Marquette, Papineau, DeLorimier. Autoproclamées « interventions », ces œuvres ignorent tout ce qui pourrait constituer une avant-garde en matière d'art public, à savoir : l'utilisation des réseaux médiatiques pour introduire des contenus critiques, la suspension de la réception passive de l'histoire de l'art monumental, la critique de l'historicisme ainsi que la critique de l'idée nostalgique que l'espace public, qui a déjà formé tout, serait désormais la proie de la modernisation capitaliste ou encore, une esthétique sociale qui dénonce le processus de réification. Bien que *FRAG sur la Main* présente un contenu beaucoup moins sectaire que *21 visages en tête*, il ne va pas beaucoup plus loin que la reproduction graphique des artefacts de la fierté ethnique et des souvenirs des chambres de

commerce locales. Il n'est donc pas étonnant qu'un des principaux bailleurs de fonds du projet – en plus de la Ville de Montréal et du gouvernement du Québec –, soit la Société du développement du boulevard St-Laurent. Malheureusement, il se trouve que *FRAG* est à l'art public ce que *Le Cavalier de Saint-Urbain* est à une introduction élémentaire à l'histoire sociale.

Que ces deux groupes en soient ou non conscients, leur travail a eu un précurseur important en 1992 avec le projet *Lower Manhattan Sign Project*, de REPOhistory, une série de 39 repères historiques conçus comme interventions tactiques, mais également dans l'esprit d'une manifestation grand public. Par opposition à l'historicisme des projets dont il a été question plus haut, *Sign Project* se voulait un engagement en faveur de ce que le philosophe Michel Foucault a appelé l'« histoire effective », c'est-à-dire un déplacement des référents historiques fixes qui est saisi, de manière complexe, comme relation à une mémoire organique « incarnée ». Le collectif REPOhistory, fondé en 1989, est un cercle d'étude réunissant des artistes, des professeurs et des activistes<sup>7</sup>. Contrairement à ATSA et à Paysages éphémères, REPOhistory est ouvertement engagé dans le secteur de la production culturelle radicale, passée aussi bien qu'actuelle. REPOhistory fait exclusivement appel au soutien d'organismes publics, comme le Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, la Municipal Art Society (New York), la Société historique de New York, le département des Transports et le conseil municipal de New York. Cette collaboration avec les organismes publics peut avoir aidé le collectif à introduire le contenu critique de plusieurs de leurs symboles. Par exemple, un signe désigne l'emplacement d'un marché d'esclaves du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, en précisant que New York était, à l'époque, le deuxième plus grand centre urbain de commerce d'esclaves aux États-Unis. Avant l'intervention de REPOhistory, nul marqueur historique ne permettait de savoir où se trouvaient les marchés d'esclaves de New York. Un signe pour le krach boursier par Jim Costanzo, un membre du collectif, intitulé *Advantages of an Unregulated Free Market Economy*, est installé sur le site de la bourse de New York. Il montre un homme d'affaires tombant/sautant depuis le sommet de sa fortune perdue – un rappel de la précarité du capitalisme. À la différence d'ATSA et de Paysages éphémères, REPOhistory a donné au mot intervention tout son sens. La leçon qu'il convient d'en tirer n'est pas que les bonnes idées et les contenus critiques sont vite repris par des artistes moins provocateurs, mais une idée plus déconcertante : l'appui des organismes publics subventionnaires a fait que certaines formes d'art public interventionniste ont été diluées jusqu'à une activité de « peintre du dimanche ». Ce qui précède n'est pas un argumentaire contre le financement des arts par l'État, mais plutôt une critique de certaines pratiques artistiques qui adoptent les traits les plus détestables du néolibéralisme, alors que les réalités locales sont avalées par les mécanismes vides du capitalisme de transnationalisation.

Marc Léger

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Krzysztof Wodiczko, « Strategies of Public Address: Which Media, Which Publics? » in Hal Foster (dir.), *Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, Seattle, Bay Press, 1987, p. 42.
- <sup>2</sup> Johanne Lamoureux, « Le musée en pièces détachées », *Public*, n° 1 (hiver 1988), p. 53-70.
- <sup>3</sup> *Idem*, « Exhibitionitis: A Contemporary Museum Ailment », in Chris Dercon (dir.), *Theatergarden Bestiarium: The Garden as Theater as Museum*, Cambridge/New York: The MIT Press/The Institute for Contemporary Art, P.S.1 Museum, 1990, p. 124.
- <sup>4</sup> Miwon Kwon, « One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity », *October*, n° 80 (printemps 1997), p. 95.
- <sup>5</sup> L'adresse du site Web d'Action Terroriste Socialement Acceptable est : [www.atsa.qc.ca](http://www.atsa.qc.ca).
- <sup>6</sup> L'adresse du site Web de Paysages éphémères est : [www.paysagesephemeres.com](http://www.paysagesephemeres.com).
- <sup>7</sup> L'adresse du site Web de REPOhistory est : [www.repohistory.org](http://www.repohistory.org).