

A Round Bar of Wood or The Daily Practice of Independence An Introduction to the work of André Cadere

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Numéro 77, automne 2006

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/8857ac>

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Éditeur(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (imprimé)

1923-2551 (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Lau, Y. (2006). A Round Bar of Wood or The Daily Practice of Independence: An Introduction to the work of André Cadere. *Espace Sculpture*, (77), 41–42.

A Round Bar of Wood or The Daily Practice of Independence

– an Introduction to the work
of André CADERE

Yam LAU

THE AGENT

The name André Cadere first came through some of my older artist friends in Toronto, then, during my brief stay in Paris, amongst my small circle of friends. Gradually, hearsay around his work and activity began to exert a fascination on me. Yet, in spite of my curiosity, critical literature on this artist is limited save for one rather comprehensive and beautifully produced catalogue published in 1992. Today Cadere remains virtually unknown outside of France. I understand that almost no one from my generation has even heard of him.

Last year I began teaching at York University and found a copy of the aforementioned catalogue that had been sitting on the library shelf since its publication. I was the first to sign it out. While it has been sometime since I contemplated writing about Cadere's work, I am finally prompted to take on the task for the sake of my students. The reason behind the fact that Cadere's had been out of sync with his and our times, I believe, has much to do with his intensely focused struggle for artistic independence. It is an accomplishment that will serve us well as a model for the future.

Originally from Romania, André Cadere arrived and practiced in Paris in the late 1960s until he died of cancer at 37 in 1978. A rich, adventurous and burgeoning international career spanned this ten-year period. Between 1970 and his death, Cadere's work can be succinctly summarized as being focused on the implementation of his work—what he called "a round bar of wood," a stick that is an assemblage of coloured segments. This entailed an almost evangelical undertaking to make the work available, or in Cadere's term, to make it "seen" in any number of potential contexts, such as the streets of Paris or in a passage way in an art museum, and not limited to being simply "exhibited" within

the gallery system. As it is, the stick is completely complicit with Cadere's life, given that he is often seen carrying it, to the extent that it had become an extension of his personality.

Cadere's implementation of the stick included walks, public exhibitions, interventions, graffiti, lectures and finally writings towards the end of his life. Even though these diverse secondary activities designed to insert the work into the (art) world are generally taken upon as typical promotional routines, in Cadere's case they are in fact critical manoeuvres that demonstrate the multivalent character of the work. In the course of Cadere's promenade, first beginning around Paris, then in other parts of Europe and New York, a great number of intersections, conflicts and connections between the work and the art world were established and thwarted. For as we shall see, the artist's unequivocal objective to make the work seen had necessarily implicated, and on many instances even subverted, the operations and protocols of the art establishment.

Today, almost thirty years after his death, Cadere's currency lies precisely in his forging of new trajectories of contention, ones that refused institutional circumscription by passing through and complicating the defined territories of sculpture, painting, relational practice and institutional critique.

A ROUND BAR OF WOOD

Bernard Marcelis in the Cadere catalogue explained that "a Round Bar of Wood" is composed of wooden segments of which the length is equal to their diameter. The segments, hand painted in different colours, are assembled according to a system of permutations that incorporates each time (an) one error. In every round bar of wood, there are four variables which make each piece different. These are colour, permutation, size and error. The permutations establish the number of segments and therefore the length of the work.

The error that is produced by the inversion of two segments is meant to highlight, through contrast, the system within which it is embedded. The work's innocuous appearance is evidence of *artisanal*, craft procedure.

When the logic of the work was worked out around 1970, it was fulfilled at its inception. It is clear that its internal logic is designed to seal the work against any anti-

liberated from traditional painting's dependence on the wall, and, as an extension, the art institution as support. The repercussion of such a statement fuelled an on-going debate between Cadere and Daniel Buren. Although both relied on an anonymous system to structure the work, Cadere criticized Buren's work as still being mired in the conventional economy of the art



pated interest in artistic evolution and public reaction. Cadere's own words testified to that effect. "The only goal of my work is to be seen, which means that reactions of indifference, hostility or love are of no interest whatever. I do not collect those sentiments of the public. My sole position is to present all my work in order to show what I do."

MILIEU AND THE DAILY PRACTICE OF INDEPENDENCE

Cadere's early exercise in painting provided a critical point of departure with respect to the formulation of the later work. For it is precisely through citing the most essential concerns of the medium that Cadere succeeded in defining the round bar of wood as being apart from painting. Unlike painting, Cadere stated, the stick has neither front, back nor sides; it is thus

My activity does not have a following, or a future. There is no evolution, a round bar of wood it is.

– André CADERE

institution. Here, Cadere was evidently seeking an even greater sense of independence from the history, economy and power relations that still sustained the critical and financial support of his most radical peers.

Within the fertile intellectual climate of late 1960s Paris, one could identify Cadere's manoeuvres as very much in tune with a

→ André Cadere,
Galerie 6 in Paris.

number of radical positions. The institutional critique performed by his work is not unlike that of Buren and Toroni except that they did not share with Cadere the steadfast desire to be an outsider with respect to the institution. If one may still regard "the round bar of wood" as a kind of painting, it must be one that had been vacated from its institutional frame, a kind of reversible painting (*peintures sans envers ni endroit*) that was brought to endure, at its origin, the anonymity and passage of the everyday. As Cadere put it, "one can easily say of this work that I produce it and that I show it, the one being the complement of the other, all of it constituting an everyday and ungraspable activity..." On that note, Cadere was also aligned to other seminal radical writers and artists then active in Paris, figures such as Henri Lefebvre and the Situationist International, for example, who identified the quotidian and the unique strategic position of the outsider as the site of radical spiritual and political transformation.

Originating from the outside, Cadere began to infiltrate the art system. For example, he would sometimes enter a gallery during his daily walk and simply leave a stick there, or arrive with it at other artists' opening. I concluded Cadere's activities to be prompted by an act of faith. For his uncompromising and "disruptive" position promised almost no reward other than hostility from the establishment. No doubt the artist strived to retain an uneasy dialectic between his self-posed marginal status and the necessity to "participate" in the art system. It was a question of personal and artistic freedom. In order for Cadere's operation to be effective, it would have meant that the stick's dependence on the art world as support and legitimation, be it the gallery wall, the artist's lecture or exhibition structure, was only provisional and not binding. According to Cadere's own words "it is important to practice this independence everyday." This statement, I think, provides the ethical imperative for Cadere the man and not merely the artist.

In a public lecture Cadere stated, "... there are museums and galleries, particular places for looking at art. If we do not take them into consideration, our position is illusory. The power of these institutions is first the power of selection. We are not in a free situation. If it is not

possible for us to destroy their power, it is necessary at least to show it. This is only possible with independent work. This independence must not be limited to the theoretical level."

It is precisely because the object is resistant to being integrated into its context, that it is able to bring the context—the power relation, the economy and the people—into view.

THE ITINERARY

The earliest documented public appearance of the "round bar of wood" saw Cadere carrying it around Paris. Up until his death, the stick was seen as an appendage to his daily life. In a scenario such as his daily walk, the stick appeared to be something like a walking stick or some sort of measuring device. Sometimes, however, Cadere would walk into galleries with his work and leave it in the exhibition space uninvited, leaning it on the wall of the current exhibition for example. Such transgressive gestures certainly provoked a certain amount of hostility and annoyance on the part of the art establishment. Consequently blacklisted, Cadere was often thrown out of galleries when sighted. A very illuminating incidence early in his career occurred as Cadere was identified at an opening (by this time his actions were known and anticipated) and was escorted out before he had a chance to leave the work in the space. In full anticipation of this, however, he had prepared and hidden in his coat a smaller piece (the dimension of the work is considered for each type of action and occasion) and succeeded to leave it behind in the exhibition before he was kicked out.

Gradually, his actions aroused support and interest in the art world. The result of that was Cadere being officially invited to exhibit. In spite of this "success," even on such occasions, Cadere never submitted entirely to the system. Each official occasion was taken as an opportunity to devise new strategy to highlight the operation of the system and its relation to the power structure. Below I will discuss a number of examples selected from an essay on Cadere by the writer Bernard Marcelis.

WALKS

At some point Cadere's walks were made public through the gallery system. In 1973, he announced two

identical "exhibitions," one through the Galerie des Tenants in Paris, the other the Galerie MTL in Brussels. The exhibitions were six months apart but the work, a public announcement of a stroll with the round bar of wood, was the same. Both events took place in Paris at the same location outside the galleries. For two hours Cadere "paced up and down a sidewalk... between the building numbers 1 to 7 with his bar... since Cadere was trying to highlight the constraints of traditional galleries."

These announced walks were not distinct from Cadere's daily walk. They were simply something that had been "bracketed" out of the everyday by virtue of its involvement with the gallery system.

A later example in New York occurred at the Hal Bromn Gallery in 1977. By that time Cadere was too sick to travel. He participated in the catalogue by sending a day-by-day agenda of his walks in Paris.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Cadere participated in numerous group exhibitions. They are notable in the sense that Cadere's uniqueness can be seen against the efforts of the other artists. For example in a rotating exhibition with a group of artists that took place at Galerie 6 in Paris, in 1973, Cadere insisted that his work be "present in the gallery during all the shows and not just his own." It was an ingenious move to further employ the stick to highlight the mechanism of the perceived inequality of the gallery. When his work was officially on exhibit, a label was placed next to it.

"TODAY... IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EXHIBITION ORGANISED BY MRS ANNA PTASKOWSKA (EXHIBITION TAKING PLACE IN THE SAME SPACE), THE ROUND BAR OF WOOD DESCRIBED SERIES... OF THE ARTIST No... CADERE."

When it was not Cadere's turn to exhibit, the work remained present in the same spot in the exhibition, except that the label used to authenticate the stick as artwork would be removed. Here, without the authenticating label, the stick was once again anonymous and ambiguous. Even when exhibiting as an invited artist, aspects of Cadere's early guerrilla interventions, and his insistence on independence, was preserved.



DISPERSED EXHIBITIONS

Often Cadere used the gallery as a strategic base for his activity. In Italy, Gallery Sperone gave Cadere thirty business cards, individuals whom Cadere visited with the purpose of discussing his work. At the end of the exhibition, the round bar of wood was brought back and presented in the gallery for a day.

On another occasion Cadere appeared at a predetermined place for six days (the duration for his exhibition) at the same time outside of the gallery that supported him in Italy. For the rest of the day, it was understood that Cadere was to wander around the neighbourhoods in the city.

AN INTRODUCTION

From the above examples, I hope to offer an impression, a sketch of the many strategies that Cadere developed. These strategies are novel responses to very specific contexts and conditions in both life and art. Regardless of what these conditions were, Cadere deployed the round bar of wood to highlight their machinations in order to subsequently mitigate their grip on the work and his personal freedom. Essentially Cadere's alliance is a pledge to the mysterious process of the "everyday" — the background that has no subject, no hero. He said of his practice that "it is because of its utterly humdrum nature that this activity cannot be reported."

That which eluded Cadere also eluded us today.¹ ←

NOTE

1. All references, images and caption in the present article are cited from *André Cadere: All Walks of Life* (Paris: La Chambre, 1992).

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The director of the Grand Palais in Paris refused Cadere entrance when he attempted to attend an exhibition of works by Jean-Pierre Raynaud during the spring of 1972.