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## Ephémère by Design?

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# ACTUALIZÉS / EXPOSITIONS

## SAINT-HYACINTHE EPHEMERE BY DESIGN ?

Michel Archambault, *The Passing Presence, Expression*,  
Saint-Hyacinthe. September 7 - October 5, 1997

A series of photo portraits stare out at you from a gallery wall. They're head-shots of monkeys, distant relatives of *homo sapiens* and look to be alive, but have actually been dead for over a century. The look in their eyes seems to contain a mystery. Stuffed for posterity in the Museum of Natural History in East Berlin, these non-living trophies are a kind of three-dimensional reproduction embalmed to represent the living species they once were. Archambault's digitalized flat photo recordings make them look more alive than they were as historical museum artifacts. They seem to be looking at the makeshift vehicle on wheels in the centre of the gallery. We do not know why this vehicle is here or what its presupposed purpose actually is. It is an ambiguous structure, a passing presence that blurs the lines between art and life.

*Oasis*, this lightweight, oversized vehicle, is an incorrigible conglomerate of bright new ready-made materials. Archambault has assembled them like a futurist sketch drawn in space. Installed on one end, a video monitor projects uncropped, unedited, slow motion images of a jellyfish expanding and contracting in space. Titled *Meduse*, the video presentation recorded at the Berlin Aquarium is passive, intimate in scale and doesn't seek to interpret its content. Air bubbles float slowly upwards around the jellyfish. The video sequences suggest a sub-aqueous hidden universe that we might find in nature, but this is the micro-context of the screen. Even structurally, this vehicle suggests displacement. We sense the instability of this act of creation, that it is memory made from material and that it will later be thrown away into the dustbin of history. Is *Oasis* a manifestation of some private inner world, where imagination reigns supreme, or could it be

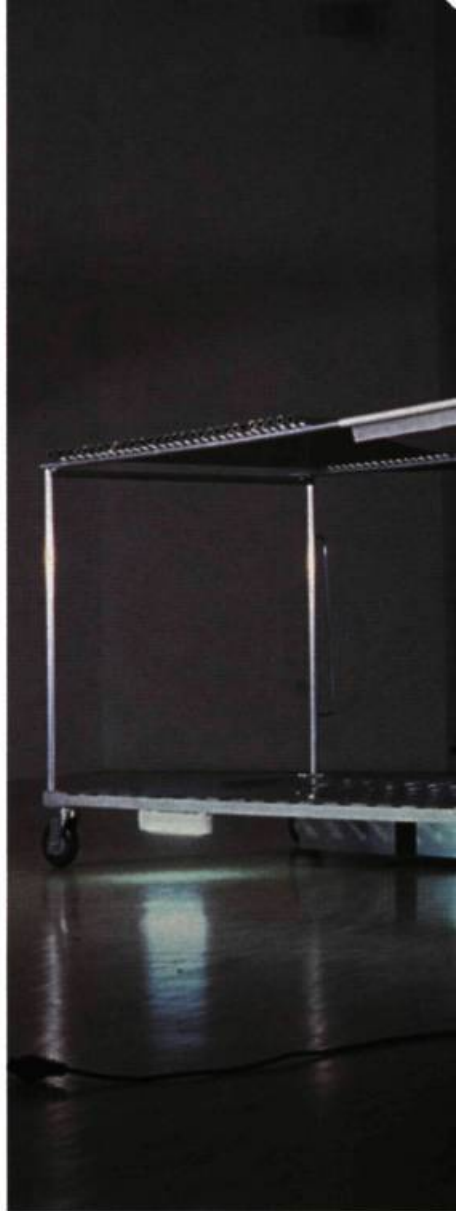
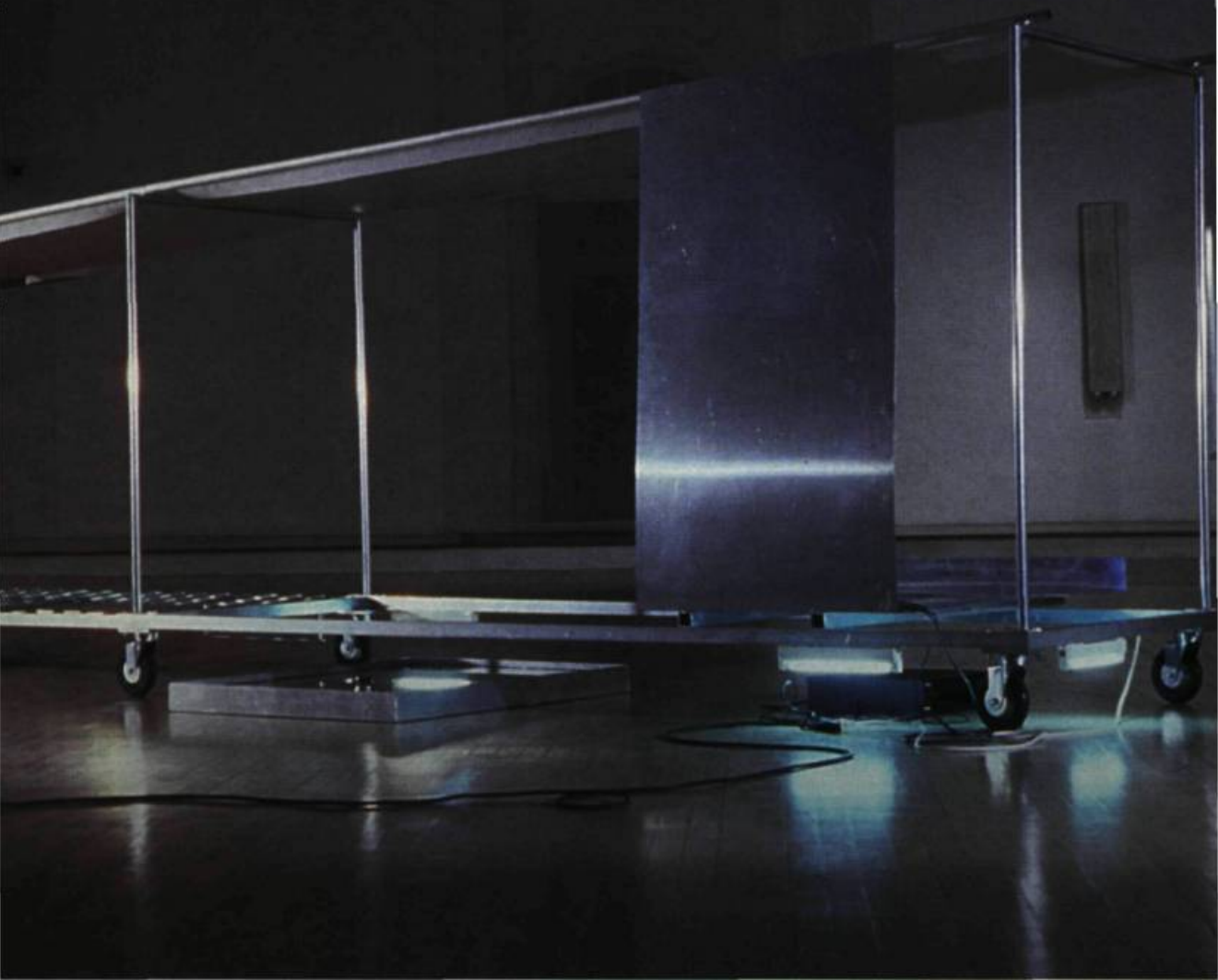


PHOTO: PIERRE GAUVIN

Michel Archambault, *History of a Logo*, 1997. Video Work for two Monitors : 34 min; filmed in Berlin.



Michel Archambault, *Passing Presence*, 1997. Photo: Pierre Gauvin.

a comment on cultural and metaphysical displacement in a world where materials, products, and even environments are transformed, reproduced and relocated *en masse*?

The fragility of the piece is ridiculous. It is awkward, impulsive, and lightweight, like some kind of joke played on the viewer and history. Despite its functional appearance, it could all fall apart in an instant if one actually tried to move it or stand on it. Quixotic, makeshift, and largely constructed out of aluminum sections it resembles a prototype from some extra-terrestrial or impossible exploratory mission left behind in a mad rush to evacuate the place. Archambault doesn't plan his installation assemblages in advance but builds them on site, bending and assembling the metal, arranging the elements — the textile, water, metal, monitor and wheels — each element in relation to the next, in each gallery or non-gallery site he exhibits in. Each element is assembled in a Meccano-set fashion, each one built upon the previous one in a sequence of structural thoughts. It's a trial sketch drafted in three-dimensional space. This one has an incongruous running board, like an old Model-T Ford's affixed to the side of the frame, tube sections on top and metal struts that straddle the frame. An opaque textile material has been casually draped over the roof like mosquito netting. A pool of water on the floor footnotes the video sequences in *Meduse*. Fluorescent lights illuminate this proto-modern behemoth from underneath, like the Low Rider cars one sees in Los

Angeles or the confabulated sci-fi modules that glide along the streets in films like *Bladerunner*.

Conventional codes of artistic practice, the accepted meaning and function of the art object, and art's relation to design meet head on. Instead of a clash, what we have is an inspired futurism, an imagistic and imaginative play on two worlds. One of these consists of objects, structures and materials used out of context or 'recontextualized'; sabotaging the mind's attempts to feel situated by provoking its rigid notions of where things belong. The other consists of imagery and environments whose process reproduces a sense of reality without offering any sense of continuity or logic to the production. As such, Archambault's *Oasis* highlights the various definitions of the artwork as 'object', 'artform' or 'imagery' as being simultaneously indeterminate. Both functional and anti-functional definitions, systematic or structural logic, do not seem to apply to this work, and this is precisely the point.

Michel Archambault's act of displacement and refabrication of materials is analogous to the way images are decontextualized and fused together in photo, print, video, film media, etc. Materials acquire a different value in a gallery context than they might have in their original, raw state in nature. One need only be reminded of Walter de Maria's *Earth Room* (1977) in Soho, New York filled as it is with 125 tons of brown soil covering 3600 square feet of real estate to a depth of 22 inches in perpetu-



PHOTO: MICHEL ARCHAMBAULT

Michel Archambault, JE, 1997. Series of six colored digitalized photographs; 16, 25 x 210 cm.

ity, to realize that art generates its own meanings, defying the natural cause and effect inherent to the physics of materials. As objects and images intertwine in our daily environment, they no longer reflect or provide clues about the origins of a site or a place — hence this sense of ephemerality in a world overloaded with objects, architecture, communications structures and imagery.

*History of a Logo* (1997), a video recorded in Berlin, Germany, affirms this sense of an ephemeral, almost fictional reality. The world-renowned Mercedes logo located on the rooftop of their corporate headquarters in Berlin was visible from the apartment Archambault lived in, on Savignyplatz. Composed of fragments and details, *History of a Logo* deceives us with its play on scale. Some-

of some scenes enable us to see details we could not see with our naked eyes. Our sense of time changes. What would otherwise be a forgettable detail in the scene of life becomes meaningful. We feel foreign, like strangers in a strange land. What does this logo mean? Is it a sign of civilisation? If it is, does its history reside in the future, the past or the present? *History of a Logo* becomes a private investigation into our collective reading of symbols and images.

Near the end of Archambault's video, we see a brief fragment of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche, a church preserved in ruins in central Berlin in perpetuity, like de Maria's *Earth Room*, but this time in remembrance of man's inhumanity to man. The camera then pans onto a

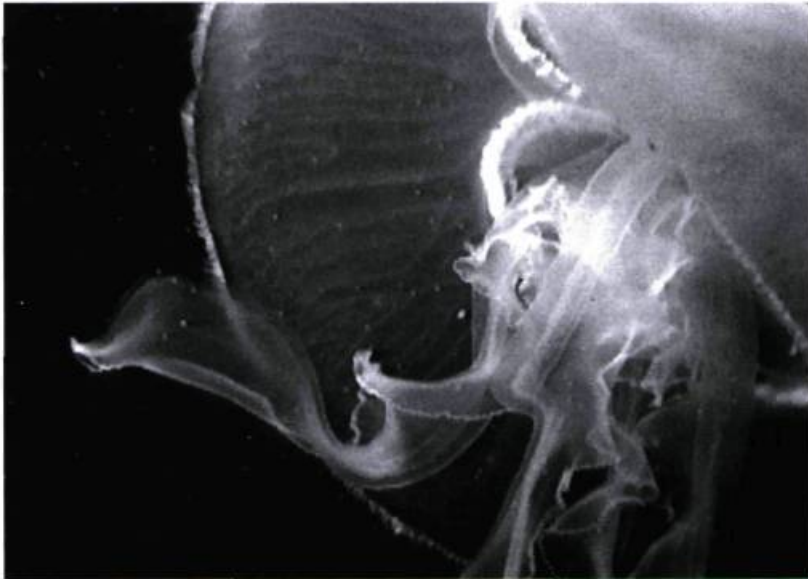


PHOTO: MICHEL ARCHAMBAULT

Michel Archambault, *Meduse*, 1997. Photos taken from the video *Meduse*; approx. : 34 min; filmed in Berlin.

times it looks like it could actually be on a Mercedes car. When we see people appearing and disappearing beneath it, we realize it is actually a huge Corporate icon. The logo slowly descends. In another sequences it rises up. Colours, deep blue and black grainy textures, close-up image fragments are collaged, cropped and edited with sound and music fragments... of running water, jazz piano and Béla Bartok. They fuse into abstraction. A guitar sequence repeats over and over again like a scratch in a recording. Obscure, like archival documentary footage, the imagery is voyeuristic. The digital enhancement and reproduction

new building project undertaken with the artist Marcus Lupertz since the unification of Germany. There is absolutely no sense of scale or integration. It is bombastic, ahistorical, an architectural concept-piece. The sequence fades out and we look at the silver painted walls that surround the empty space in which these two monitors sit on the floor. A passing presence.

JOHN K. GRANDE