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Interview with Michel de Broin

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Montreal artist Michel de Broin has spent the last few months in London in residence at ACME. Winner of the 2007 Sobey Art Prize, Michel is an incredibly prolific artist: in 2009 he had solo shows at Plug In (Winnipeg), Le Cabinet (Paris) and his work was seen in exhibitions in Spain, Belgium, Latvia, Germany, France, Chile, Canada and the USA. This summer he is included in a group exhibition at bitforms in New York. I first met Michel in 1998 and included his work in an exhibition at Bard College in New York, and then worked with him again ten years later, also in New York, for the exhibition *Untethered* at Eyebeam. In February 2010, after visiting galleries in his new home neighbourhood of Hackney we sat in his studio and talked about his commission for Nuit Blanche in Paris, his exhibition *Reciprocal Energy*, and his current work recently completed for the biennial in Rennes.

Sarak Cook: *Tell me about the process of being invited to be in Nuit Blanche in Paris last year.*

Michel de Broin: We have to go back a bit. I was invited by curator Alexia Fabre, after the show I did with her in 2008 at the MAC/VAL (Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marnes), *Reciprocal Energy*. It is one of the most interesting contemporary art museums in France. I did a three-month residency in Paris and developed that project there during that time. Because they didn't know what my project would be they put it in the far corner of the museum, a bit lost on the second floor. But it was a very successful exhibition for MAC/VAL in terms of the audience reception, so in the end it was up for two years and the curator acquired all four works for their collection.

S. C.: *What were the works?*

M. d. B.: The first piece, *Untitled*, is a light box that has had its contents sucked out (been turned inside out). You can see the detail of the inside of the light box, but it is disconnected (not plugged in). It is used as a sign on entering the exhibition as though it was advertising the show, but it is bare, without signification.

S.C.: *Mute.*

M. d. B.: Yes. The next piece was a refrigerator attached to a column in the museum, hacked, or captured, and being used to power the installation in the adjacent gallery. The back side of the refrigerator had a formal resemblance to the inner space revealed by the empty light box.

If you followed the tube from the refrigerator it connected to another piece, *Ironie*, which was intended to produce irony, but in a physical form. It is a kinetic sculpture, a machine which exchanges suction for pressure. It is ironic and organic and powered by the pump in the fridge. The fridge is supplying the necessary energy for the piece to work. Inside the darkened gallery was *Station*. It is an architectural model of a gas station linked to a liposuction facility, complete with a public art piece stationed in front. There is a sign in front of the gas station, and as the extraction of fat from human beings is very expensive, the price of the gas is displayed. The piece is about the transformation of fat into diesel by a process called 'transesterification'.

The main concept here is that if you use a car you accumulate fat (by not exercising) and the car needs fat to make enough energy to work. It is related to my piece *Shared Propulsion Car*, about human power (the 'will to power' being a renewable energy).

S. C.: *The piece in which the car's engine has been removed and each seat has a set of bicycle pedals which the driver and passengers use to power the car.*

M. d. B.: Yes. *Station* is also about the relation between the driver/passenger and the car, but pretending to solve the problem of transport. Of course it is absurd because the price of the fat extraction is very expensive: 456 euro for 1 litre of fuel, to drive 25 km.

The model is made from cardboard, plastic, polyester resin, and spaghetti. It is about a meter and a quarter wide. Just behind the model in the exhibition was a video projection showing a car filmed from above, it looks as though it is a matchbox car. You can see a lot of smoke and bright light inside the car, and it doesn't seem to know where it is going—it goes back and forth, drives backwards, and makes strange loops. It is probably because the relation between the driver and the car has changed—the car is sucking his energy. The car is driving the driver. The car doesn't know where to go because the driver is consumed by the car. The video really creates the ambiance in the gallery. The music is a bit like the music of a carousel. I made the video in a football field; I

like all the tracks and lines which are left by the car, like those of an ice skater on the ice.

S. C.: So how do you get from 'transesterification' to a seven and a half meter wide disco ball hanging over the Jardin du Luxembourg?

M. d. B.: The invitation to *Nuit Blanche* was on the basis of this connection with the MAC/VAL and also of the public art projects I have done, including a *Nuit Blanche* project (*Overflow*) in Toronto. First I proposed to gather half a dozen street lights and hang them upside down from a construction crane to make a chandelier. I think it would have worked well in this context, because we had been talking about the *Jardin* as a site for the work. Then I saw the ambition of the curator and the possibilities that were open after visiting the site, so I thought, why not do a much bigger piece that could be seen from everywhere in Paris? Then my idea was to make the largest disco ball ever made and beat the Guinness World Record. The photomontage I initially gave to the curators was from a 1942 photograph called "The Battle of Los Angeles", an image which conspiracy theorists cite about UFOs. It is an image of anti-aircraft light beams during wartime. Paris is known as 'The City of Lights', but because of its lights, it is impossible to see the sky. Yet the sky has always been a source of inspiration for poets, philosophers and artists. Without being able to contemplate the sky, that depth and source of inspiration, is gone. So my proposal was to give the sky back to the Parisians.

Since then I have received 25 invitations to show the piece in Rio, Berlin, Amsterdam, London, Brussels, Winnipeg, Bratislava—but it is impossible. It is so expensive to hire it—it takes two trucks to carry the piece. Just transport, location, hire and the installation for one night is prohibitively expensive. I beat the Guinness World Record for the world's largest disco ball, but I didn't register it because if you do you lose all the rights to the images.

S.C.: How was the work received?

M. d. B.: It was up for only the one night, and 2 million people attend *Nuit Blanche* in Paris, but not all of them could see it because there was a long line to get into the *Jardin*. There were five light beams (DCA projector bulbs) trained on it. The refracted light squares that were cast, because the individual mirrors were so huge, were like big pieces of paper streaming across the landscape.

S.C.: It makes me think of a few different things, other experiential projects—the Expo 67 Biosphere by Buckminster Fuller in Montreal, Yvette Mattern's new piece *One to Many* seen in Berlin at *Transmediale 2010*, which is a laser rainbow beamed across the city at night, and Goh Ideta's lovely piece which I saw at the *Wunderbar Festival* in Newcastle in 2009, where people can jump on a mattress embedded with little mirrors—a bit like a flattened disco ball—and cause the reflected squares of light on the wall to dance around.

M. d. B.: Those works look really great! There are many disco balls in contemporary art; my obsession was to make the biggest one and place it in the sky

S.C.: You've done a number of public art works, and have prepared a lot of work for commissions which are not always accepted, why?

M. d. B.: Mostly because of security (in terms of public access). Recently one of my projects was rejected because a member of the jury was afraid my piece could attract teenagers. One of the reasons I like to do ambitious things is that they create great opportunities for collaboration. I prepare six or more commissions every year, and then there are perhaps two or three which are realized. Because of the successful ones I often then receive invitations for the next one and don't have to chase after them.

S.C.: So which one are you working on right now?

M. d. B.: I am developing a version of my earlier work *Revolutions* which is a public art project in Montreal—a twisted staircase. I wanted to have it accessible

Michel de Broin, *Untitled*, 2008. Lightbox, thermoformed plastic; 75 x 130 cm. A light box has been emptied of its contents by a suction device. The plastic cover is deformed and reveals the relief of the background neon lights and electric installation. The disconnected promotional device has become a bony, veinous and naked body without content.





to the public and I was frustrated it wasn't possible there. They didn't want people to be able to walk on it, and they were very strict about that. The only way it can be considered a public art work is for people to be able to stand *in front of* it. For the commissioners in Montreal, if you can stand *on* it, it is not an artwork any more. For the biennial in Rennes in France, the title is *Hundred steps Revolution* but I am thinking of the idea of *ce qui vient* (what comes). The question of time is important in the piece, as is the idea of the eternal return. Everything that is raised comes down again, in cycles. What is great is that in this case they want people to be able to walk on it. I first proposed a version that I would be able to build myself with recycled wood but it was impossible on a public site. The project has become more complex. We have found a sponsor who is interested in sponsoring the work but we need the engineer's approval, and that's what I am working on now. The piece needs to meet the security requirements for a public site to be installed in an airport or anywhere. To create that network, that flow, all the steps are of different size. This staircase doesn't take you anywhere; it doesn't go from 'A to B', but from 'A to A'. In fact because of this, it doesn't fit the criteria of a staircase. Like my *Shared Propulsion Car*: it's not a car, it has no engine, so it's not a car, it's a bicycle, and this is why I won my court case for the traffic violation in Toronto. We were arrested because the police were fooled by the illusion I created. It is all about perception.

Interview in May 2010, by Sarah Cook

Sarah Cook is Canadian and a curator and researcher at the University of Sunderland, UK. Her book, *Rethinking Curating: Art after New Media* (co-authored with Beryl Graham) will be available from MIT Press in 2010.

Michel de Broin, *Hundred Steps Revolution*, 2010. With its 40-meter path, *Hundred Steps Revolution* is comparable to a five-story staircase. Housed in the Couvent des Jacobins, *Hundred Steps Revolution* takes its inspiration from a spiral stairway. By forming a knot, the metal stairway deconstructs the symbol of vertical ascension with which it is normally associated. Here the sculpture allows one to enter an infinite cycle of revolutions where everything rises only to descend according to the rhythm of evolutions and transformations. The visitor can climb up the stairway and physically experience the idea of an eternal return, in a time loop where what comes, is similar to what returns.

