

La Triennale québécoise 2011

Le travail qui nous attend

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Performing Time, Performing Space

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In a desolate, snowbound landscape, a glimmer of colour appears on the horizon. Carried by the wind, this tinted cloud gradually advances until it fills practically the entire screen with a misty mantle of purple. The video is a “performance” by Charles Stankieveh —executed in the wilderness of the Far North— of Jules Olitski’s painting *Instant Loveland*, 1968. Some distance from where he had placed his camera, the artist let off a smoke grenade, and the resulting purplish haze was transported by the wind sweeping across the snowy plain. The colour effect lasts only a few seconds on the screen —just the time to register that the encounter between the Arctic light and the purple cloud created by the grenade has something of the sublime. The artist’s idea was to transpose his experience of *Instant Loveland* into the vastness of the Arctic, to re-create the effect of the painting—one of the first without form. But the link between the two works is based on more than just visual effect. As Stankieveh explains: “The video was researched to find the right mix of painting and landscape/light/smoke to make the layering and movement resonate between the two works.”¹ In other words, *LOVELAND*, 2009–2011, is the perfect coming together of an art experience and a real situation. It is important to remember, moreover, that it results from an action made by the artist, and that the abstract image of the painting as “performed” in the landscape and captured by the camera is the image of something that actually happened.

This shift of art toward performative action seems to me to exemplify a new artistic sensibility shared by a number of the artists included in the *Triennial*. Their performativity manifests itself in a range of ways, often in practices and media where it is least expected. Understanding it requires, first, a broadening of the usual notion of performance beyond its strict definition and a special sensitivity to works involving some kind of gesture or action by the artist: perhaps the filming of a performance, the staging of a situation, the increased mobilization of participants or collaborators, or the integration of process into work. Whatever its precise form, this performativity (like 1960s conceptualism) puts the accent on the experimental nature of art and pushes meaning away from object and toward action—but it is also accompanied by a new kind of *engagement*. As with performance proper, which often courts risk, a number of the resulting works take action to extremes in their effort to thoroughly explore the art experience, even to push it to

1. Charles Stankieveh, e-mail to Mark Lanctôt, March 9, 2011.

its very limits. The power of a work like *LOVELAND* is an evident product of this urge to breach boundaries, for it captures the effect of a painting by exploding a military device in an increasingly militarized zone that is under constant surveillance — the Beaufort Sea in the Arctic Ocean, just north of a North Warning System radar station.

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My focus in this essay will be artists who exhibit some kind of performative action, who use the language of performance but deploy it in the realms of image and sound. This fertile idea (which there is space here to barely touch upon) opens onto the vast field of *the work ahead of us*.²

00.01.94 Another excellent example of the reconstruction of painting in performative mode is the work of **Claudie Gagnon**, who adapts the technique of the *tableau vivant* to the contemporary art approach of performance. Dating back to the eighteenth century — or further, to the earliest live Nativity scenes — the *tableau vivant* (literally, a “living picture”) involves the motionless staging of an image. Creating such scenes in order to film them (a first) rather than present them live to an audience,³ *Tableaux*, 2011, re-explores the genres, compositions, poses and gestures of painting, but puts the emphasis not on the action of the various figures, which is actually quite minimal, but on sound. The characters, who barely move, seem to be animated by an odd acoustic presence that underlines Gagnon’s grotesque and humorous view of the history of art, which is further heightened by the transposition of the *tableau vivant*, via video, into a moving image. Each scene — whether featuring the female saints of Zurbarán and El Greco, Ribera’s bearded woman, a fifteenth-century genre picture by Netherlandish artist Hieronymus Bosch, the surrealism of Otto Dix, Munch’s famous *Scream*, the *saltimbanques* of Daumier and Picasso — possesses an extremely subtle audio dimension.⁴ Allegories of painting, these *tableaux vivants* cast a contemporary, amusing and ironic eye over the art of the past.

Such retrospective allegorization or re-enactment resonates with the ideas of German philosopher Walter Benjamin, who saw the allegory as an opening up of time, or — in today’s terms — a performative (and critical) review of the past. In a rather complex passage of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin attempts to pinpoint the temporal nature of this dynamic: “That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual: its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete.”⁵ This temporal openness is, in my view, crucial to understanding what prompts so many artists to mine the recent or distant past, as if it devolved upon every present

2. It should be noted that at the time of writing, a number of works included in the exhibition were not yet finished.

3. Aside from a short video made in 1998, *Passe-moi le ciel*, this is the first time Claudie Gagnon has made use of the *tableau vivant* for a video. In live performances, the immobility of the actors conveys the rigidity of the original scenes, while here the moving video image and the sound track make the motionless figures seem less static.

4. *To Beauty*, 1922, by Otto Dix, *Family Portrait*, 1954, by Dorothea Tanning, *Bearded Woman*, 1631, by Jusepe de Ribera, *Ira*, around 1450, by Hieronymus Bosch, *The Scream*, 1893, by Edvard Munch, *Soir bleu*, 1914, by Edward Hopper, *Saltimbanques*, 1865, by Honoré Daumier, *St. Veronica Holding the Veil*, 1579, by El Greco, *St. Agatha*, 1630–1633, by Zurbarán, *La Légende du point d’Argentan*, 1962, by Gaston Latouche.

5. Walter Benjamin, “Epistemo-Critical Prologue,” in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London and New York: Verso, 1998), p. 45. I have referred previously to this passage by Benjamin in discussing Eve Sussman’s cinematic reconstructions of paintings.

to reflect on and work out its relationship with what has gone before. The significance we assign to this constant refiguring of history is a huge question,⁶ but for brevity's sake and for the purposes of this essay let us accept that the current artistic attitude to time reflects Benjamin's approach quite closely. The new sensibility in fact offers a way of "performing" time, either by means of a re-enactment that involves a performative return to the past, or—as we shall see—by working with a diversity of time modalities.⁷

00.02.86 A number of artists move back and forth between past, present and future, manipulating time and playing with different time registers, appropriating works and recasting them in different temporalities while changing the ways they are produced and exhibited. With *EKFTFF451*, 2011 **Ève K. Tremblay** has transformed Ray Bradbury's 1953 science fiction novel into a work in progress that has been ongoing since 2007. It is a major project with multiple facets, including several photographic series, videos, texts, and performances in which the artist taxes her memory by attempting to recite passages from the novel aloud.⁸ Intrinsically performative, the work also explores the structure of memory and the techniques of memorization developed scientifically to increase its potential. Though published in 1953, the narrative of *Fahrenheit 451* is set in 1990—a future that has now become our past. According to the story, literature is being destroyed, and people have begun memorizing whole books to save them from oblivion. The exploitation of the science fiction narrative in *Becoming Fahrenheit 451* is an evident manipulation of time: by bringing this act of memorization into our own present, the book's futuristic dimension appears to us simultaneously as an experience of the past and something that has yet to happen. This shift backwards actually results in a kind of retro-futurism, a back-to-front image of time where the future is already past, and time itself—as Benjamin maintained—is incomplete.

00.01.66 In **Olivia Boudreau**'s works there is no action other than that of time performing itself: each of her videos captures a situation characterized by slowness, waiting and repetition. The artist films the most banal scenes over an extended period of time, recording the transformation of things in their own duration: a horse in its stall (*Box*, 2009, 23 hours), two bodies in a bathtub (*Le Bain*, 2010, 23 minutes), a sheet moving gently in the wind (*Le Mur*, 2010, 73 minutes), two women in a sauna (*L'Étuve*, 2011, about 20 minutes). What these virtually narrativeless situations share is a sense of the passing and recording of time. Boudreau identifies the temporalities of performance and film to the point that the shooting of the performance coincides exactly with the duration of the work. The interruption of both image and

6. As well as Benjamin's, the writings of the historian Reinhart Koselleck are also relevant here. See *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985).

7. See Bernard Schütze's essay, "Matters of Waiting," in this publication.

8. A number of the artists included in the *Triennial* play an active role in their installations during the exhibition. Among them are Julie Favreau and Massimo Guerrera, whose work also requires the participation of the public. The performance by Ève K. Tremblay is a major feat of memory, for she recites several passages from the novel by heart.

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sound that occurs in *Le Bain* is caused by the changing of the 16-mm camera's reel. In *L'Étuve*, again, it is the performance of time that structures the image and gives the work its form: in the restricted space of a sauna, female bodies appear and disappear according to fluctuations in the light and the density of the steam. Describing this project, Boudreau compares the strange vulnerability of the image and the uneasiness it sparks in the spectator to the uncomfortable proximity of bodies in a sauna. The image is subjected to the same spatial and temporal constraints that shape the real situation.

00.02.38 This idea of filming the reality of time passing can be related to the way **Frédéric Lavoie** uses documentary techniques to stage and scrutinize nature. *À l'affût*, 2011, is a “fake” nature documentary that pushes scientism—based on a system of observation, contemplation and waiting—to extremes. Assuming the guise of an explorer or anthropologist, the artist re-scripts the animal world by presenting images where practically nothing happens. The rhythm of the piece is imposed by nature, thereby avoiding the common tendency to anthropomorphize animals and instill their lives with narrative and dramatic tension. “Animal” time replaces human time. By turning the true/false dichotomy on its head, this pseudo-documentary reveals how human beings project their perceptions onto the animal world.

00.02.46 **Emmanuelle Léonard** exploits a similar categorical blurring when she uses a documentary approach to structure her subjects' performances. She has documented crime scenes and demonstrations with the precision of a press photographer; she has commissioned people to take photographs of their places of work. More recently, for *Le Beau et le Laid*, 2011, she invited a group of girls from a Montréal high school to share their thoughts about beauty and ugliness. But when asked to give their opinion and assert themselves in front of the camera the girls freeze up, evidently finding it hard to take advantage of this opportunity for unlimited self-expression. Performing poorly, expressing their vulnerability rather than their ideas, they create a situation that is as uncomfortable for us as it is for them.

In some ways, this approach is reminiscent of how Myriam Yates and Lynne Marsh reconstruct musical performances through film: Yates's subject is the setting for the huge show put on at the Hippodrome de Montréal by the Irish rock band U2 (held on July 8 and 9, 2011, and attended by over 80,000 people); Marsh's focus is a TV camera crew's filming of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra.

00.02.90 **Myriam Yates** began her exploration of the Hippodrome de Montréal—which has so far given rise to *Occupants*, 2005, *A Space Between Mirrors*, 2010, and *Amphithéâtre*, 2010,—in 2005. Her aim has been to document the obsolescence of a place that during the twentieth century was a vibrant

centre of entertainment and socialization.⁹ Adopting a quasi-documentary observation technique, she records the site contemplatively, anonymously, allowing the images to unfold and the camera to move at a distinctly measured pace. For *Racetrack-Superstar-Ghost*, 2011, Yates does not film the U2 concert itself but the stage built for it, lurking like some strange animal in the middle of the racetrack. Her idea is to capture the interaction between two event-related structures—the old racetrack buildings, unoccupied since October 2009, and the installation of the massive, four-legged set conceived for the show.¹⁰ In the first case, time seems suspended by abandonment; in the second, it is projected spectacularly into the future. Yates attempts to capture this interface between realities rooted in diametrically opposed temporalities by highlighting contrasts of both image and sound. Shot in 16 mm rather than video, the film preserves the temporality of the deserted space, its feeling of superannuation, while documenting the highly technical aspects of a mega concert; on the one hand we see broad, relatively empty, monochromatic shots of the pre-concert “wasteland,” and on the other, close-ups of the massively dark and enigmatic structure built for the show. There are also travelling shots of the Hippodrome’s initially empty interiors, where all sorts of material required for the concert (wires, loudspeakers, metal scaffolds) gradually accumulates, taking possession of the abandoned spaces. In the equally complex sound track, the hum of the building’s ventilation system mixes with ambient concert noise and the sounds of U2’s musical performance.¹¹

00.02.54 **Lynne Marsh** shows a similar concern for form in her filming of different spaces and buildings: a dance hall in London (*Ballroom*, 2004), the stadium built by Hitler for the 1936 Olympics and renovated for the 2006 FIFA World Cup (*Stadium*, 2008), a Berlin television studio (*Camera Opera*, 2008), an abandoned amusement park (*Plänterwald*, 2010), or the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra’s concert hall (*The Philharmonie Project*, 2011). In this last project, which is ongoing, Marsh offers an oblique, off-centre view of her subject. Rather than filming the musical performances themselves, she focuses her camera on the TV crew charged with recording concerts in which the orchestra plays works by Mahler, Bruckner and Nielsen. While remaining connected to the music, we experience the concert from a backstage position. Watching the images is like watching the orchestra following its conductor, but in the space of the film and not the hall, according to the rhythm of the cameras and not the music. It is as if the camera team reinterprets the music in another space. The director matches his gestures to those of the conductor: he synchronizes the cameras with the players, the image with the audio, the shots with the music.

9. The Blue Bonnets Raceway, constructed in 1907, was during certain periods one of the city’s most visited spots. In 1961, the site was rebuilt in its present form, with its huge modern buildings, stands and racetrack.

10. It is worth noting that this idea of constructing the set for a show in an abandoned and obsolete space can be related to Michel Foucault’s notion of “heterotopia.” This is not the place to go into further detail, but I refer readers to Foucault’s important 1967 essay “Des espaces autres,” included in the posthumously published collection *Dits et écrits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994). An English translation by Jay Miskowiec entitled “Of Other Spaces” was published in *Diacritics* 16, 1 (Spring 1986), p. 22–27.

11. This description comes from Myriam Yates’s original project proposal; at the time of writing, the film had not yet been made.

Marsh has likened the filming to a choreography, a dance where the rhythm and intensity of the music are translated by the action of the cameramen. Each image is precisely controlled and meticulously rendered: this is the camera as performer.

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Sound artists often perform live, and (owing to the properties of the medium) sound in contemporary art at large — a growing presence — frequently involves a performative dimension. This is manifest in the *Triennial* selection in diverse ways: sound is given visual form (Nelson Henricks); a piece of music is performed by machines ([The User]); the poetic dimension of an audio space is made to reveal its otherwise unplumbable depths (Magali Babin); we are forced to recognize the acoustic intensity of our media environment (Jean-Pierre Aubé); and sound transmission is embodied in a sculptural object (Steve Bates). All these artists work with the idea that spaces are occupied by sound, whether obvious or not, whether produced by the natural environment or by some media or technological source.

00.02.02 The works of **Nelson Henricks** aim to illustrate the materiality of sound by making it visible. They are based on complex sonic sources, like the image of the wave in *2287 Hz*, 2011, which allows the visualization of sound waves. Sound is also materialized in objects, often obsolete ones: typewriters, wireless sets, microphones, record players and loudspeakers make a comeback in his works. To render it visual, Henricks separates sound from image, showing the spaces peculiar to each and reshaping their relationship within the expositional context. The acoustic waves or the feet of the dancer on the video screen perform the sound, but within the space and duration of the image. There is something didactic, even scientific, about this impulse to study the mechanisms and properties of image and sound — even though the conceptual uses to which they are put run counter to contemporary technological developments and communication systems.

The conceptual approach to sound has led a number of artists to create acoustic or musical compositions designed for presentation in spaces that are empty or set up as listening stations. An example is *Bruits de fond*, 2010–2011, by

00.01.34 **Magali Babin**, which is the product of an underwater recording excursion in the St. Lawrence River (between Montréal and Percé) that revealed an astonishing world of live sound textures. While Babin works with living audio material to delve into the musical richness of the natural environment,

00.02.82 **[The User]** exploits the sonic traces of outdated technologies, exploring the limited “musical” potential of printers, clocks and metronomes. These mass-produced objects share an inevitable obsolescence that makes them readily available as artistic material. In general, their sound register is extremely limited: the “natural” sound of printers, for example,

is standard, minimal and repetitive—a solid clunk. *Quartet for Dot Matrix Printers*, 2004, and *Symphony for Dot Matrix Printers*, 2004, take full advantage of the minute variations of sound permitted by the “instruments” on which they are played. This is music derived from the recycling-as-sound of an outdated technology, performed by the technology itself.

Working with audio signals, waves and frequencies, Jean-Pierre Aubé and Steve Bates aim to reveal the hidden sounds of our media environment by giving it visual form. **00.01.30** **Jean-Pierre Aubé** is especially interested in the very low-frequency waves that occur naturally or are generated by different technologies, and he uses these acoustic phenomena as the raw material for improvisational performance or image creation. In *Electrosmogs*, 2011, for example, he sketches the electromagnetic “audioscape” of a specific site; for *VLF. Finlande*, 2002–2003, made hundreds of kilometres away from man-made disturbances, the artist decoded and recorded the magnetic environment of the aurora borealis; and *31 soleils (Dawn Chorus)*, 2010, is a “real” representation of the sunrise produced by the sound waves emitted by the sun’s rays (it is during its rise that the sun’s rays travel furthest). Like many other sound artists, Aubé takes knowledge of the environment beyond our perceptual capacities, revealing a covert but pervasive audio presence.

00.01.42 **Steve Bates** is also interested in the acoustic content of our environment, and in investigating its transmission and its relationship to space he often makes use of site-specific audio material. Designed to pick up ambient sounds and transmit them through space, *Concertina*, 2011, is a sculptural installation composed of two FM radios, two low-frequency transmitters and a spiral of barbed wire that spans the gallery. The sound waves captured *in situ* by the FM radios travel back and forth through the space. As well as being a reference to borders, territorial confinement and imprisonment—contemporary military politics, in fact—the spiral of barbed wire serves as a transmission antenna in an untrammelled space. For Bates, this superimposition of the military and the cultural is embodied in the dual meaning of the word “concertina,” which can refer either to the musical instrument or to the coils of razor wire used to form obstacles: “*Concertina* is a poetic reflection on limit, border, the inter-relationship between sound/music and military techno-culture, the contradictions between border enforcement and contemporary migration patterns. *Concertina* is both object of intense, potentially violent, physical presence and an internal contradiction as it breaks with its own form through the transmission it is charged with.”¹² Bates misappropriates military *matériel* to force

12. From a description of *Concertina* provided by the artist.

an encounter between reality and art. And at a time when space has never seemed so controlled, *Concertina* triggers a reflection on sound space as free space.

00.02.50 The same kind of diversion of military and technological material is a leitmotif of the work of **Rafael Lozano-Hemmer**, notably in his monumental public installations where human beings have an impact on the configuration of the space. Lozano-Hemmer makes frequent use of computerized surveillance systems—military devices designed to increase control of the human environment, oversee border zones and restrict individual movement. Much of his work is concerned with re-appropriating these control technologies and assigning them artistic and relational functions that result in a repossession of social space. For the past several years, he has been using the searchlights employed by the U.S. government for monitoring its border with Mexico. He employs them, though, in a thoroughly counteractive way, creating unrestricted spaces where people can participate in all freedom—either via computers and the Internet, using cell phones, or—as in *Architectural Intersection. Relational Architecture 18*, 2011—in a public space like place des Festivals: in these projects, the work is performed by the people.

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The issues arising from artistic performativity and the encounters it generates between the experience of art and of reality have yet to be fully defined. This—exploring what is still unfathomable and unpredictable—is *the work ahead of us*.

Translated by Judith Terry