

La Triennale québécoise 2011

Le travail qui nous attend

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Cold Current

“Distance,” “reduction,” “suspension,” “reserve/restraint,” “coldness”—perhaps this introductory cluster of notions will suffice to define a thread running through a great many of the works in this triennial exhibition. And although this hypothetical thread may not strictly delimit the exhibition’s boundaries, it is also applicable to a much greater number of artistic practices in Québec and elsewhere.

Mises en abyme: *Time at Rest*—The *Triennial’s* title, *The Work Ahead of Us*, points in the direction of a double borrowing that gives a fair idea of the practices it refers to—double because it is taken from a 2009 Grier Edmundson exhibition that in turn borrowed it from Tatlin. That such a doubling should focus on modernism is not a coincidence. On the contrary, it is characteristic of the widespread popularity of certain historical forms that, despite their relative formal “coldness” and sparse visual syntax, involved dynamic, critical effectiveness. Among these forms, one must certainly mention—beyond various idioms proper to modernism—the conceptual art and minimalism of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the broader spectrum of interdisciplinary practices that, during these same two decades, revisited the strategies of the early twentieth-century avant-gardes. The historical rereading of these movements and, one might add, the current interpretation of this rereading have become a staple of contemporary artistic practices. Research in the archives (history in its “cold” state) and the many forms this research takes (re-enactments, alternative curatorial models, institutional reflection) can also be understood as belonging to this broad paradigm. Although not all the works discussed below fall exclusively within this rereading, a number of them rely on aspects of its visual syntax and aesthetic notions.

Within the field of recent practices, many artists borrow from the history of modernist devices. For example,

00.01.58 *Prounen-Raum. Mur, bois, couleur*, by **Sophie Bélaire Clément** reconstructs the famous *Proun Room* created by El Lissitzky for the *Great Berlin Art Exhibition* in 1923 and later re-created at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. However, Bélaire Clément retains only its architectural form, minus the works, effecting a sort of contextual *mise en abyme* that explores art’s institutional history. In the production of

00.01.62 **Matthew Biederman**, a colourful type of minimal geometric abstraction liberally employing light projections and new techniques of producing and distributing images occurs

00.01.08

00.01.86 alongside group projects with sociocultural and geopolitical implications (the Arctic Perspective Initiative). Thus, the artist indirectly investigates the old modernist paradigm that intended to develop a relatively unified syntax of forms and techniques founded on structural elements, in the spirit of a dialogue between art and social progress. Elsewhere, in *We Will See What Is Possible* (2009), Grier Edmundson reprises Tatlin's famous project for a revolving *Monument for the Third International*; he exhibits this work in combination with a series of "doubled" symmetrical paintings representing—beside drawings like *Good Things to Come*, 2009, and *Untitled (After Malevich)*, 2009—a radiating or "starburst" abstraction (*yesterday it was today, today it is tomorrow, tomorrow it will be...*, 2009), a partly collapsed social housing apartment building (*quietly come, quietly go [Ronan Point 2 times]*, 2009) and a runner wearing a t-shirt with "Oregon" written on it (*America's Prodigy*, 2009).¹ In those works, the logic of idealized elevation and modern outdoing, played out on both the individual and the social level, is put to the test of a heterogeneous curatorial syntax that undermines utopianism while employing its terms. Some artists return to modernism in yet other ways and media. The works of Jessica Eaton, for example, in particular the *cfaal* series, 2010–2011, hark back to the early technical phase of analogue photography, focusing on the specific terms of the medium and the elementary processes of vision and the codes it employs. They compose or decompose forms and primary colours by addition or subtraction, through relatively rudimentary technical devices that refer as much to modernists like Josef Albers and László Moholy-Nagy as to contemporary computer-assisted design. In a related vein, Stéphane La Rue has recently undertaken—long after his exploration of the object-painting and the white monochrome—a corpus of 35 watercolours on paper in relief (*Mouvement n° 4 : Futur antérieur*, 2010–2011). Using primary colours, folds, cutouts and various configurations of hanging, these works of reduced means share a good many of modernism's pictorial characteristics: reduction of expressive signs, preoccupation with surface quality, formal interplay of lines and surfaces accentuating effects of continuity and disruption. These features act both within and between individual works.

Mirror, Glass, Reflection—Recourse to elementary formal procedures can occur in contexts other than abstraction and inform the discourse of a work by engaging with its iconography. This is true of the formal doubling (sometimes inverted and multiplied) in the work of Grier Edmundson. In connection with this device, the themes of narcissism and the trap also come into play occasionally. Sometimes,

1. These were in the exhibition *The Work Ahead of Us*, at BATTAT Contemporary in 2009.

the reflection is multiplied infinitely, almost like a kaleidoscope. This happens when already doubled and multiplied symmetrical images of Ronald Reagan (or the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, which collapsed in 1940) printed on wallpaper are reflected in a mirrored cube along with other works in the exhibition. The motif of the mirror, prevalent in the 2008 *Québec Triennial* (in the practices of David Altmejd, Gwenaël Bélanger and Nicolas Baier, for example), reappears in the present edition

- 00.01.46 of the exhibition. In the recent production of **Lorna Bauer** (*Untitled No. 1, Untitled No. 2*, 2010), the photographic image decomposes in an effect resembling kaleidoscopic fragmentation. In the video work *Kaleidoscope*, 2009, a mirror surface set on the ground in a snowy landscape shatters when the artist shoots it with a rifle. In *Éminence grise (Documentary Photographer)*, 2011, a camera mounted on a tripod “captures” its own image on a dark reflecting surface, while the artist appears discreetly in the background. All these practices share in a sort of phenomenological exercise in the primary elements of visibility. They are propelled by a kind of thinking that approaches technical procedures from the standpoint of determining the anchoring points between their structural qualities and an array of broader psychological and ideological factors. The emphasis on sensory effects related to material qualities — transparency, reflecting properties — can suggest a sense of the precipitation of experience, or a meditation on notions of rupture and the void. Similar effects occur in
- 00.02.22 another form in *Windshields*, 2009, by **Valérie Kolakis**, where a high-contrast close-up photograph of shattered windshields is itself coldly parcelled out into a grid. Some monochrome
- 00.02.14 paintings by **Chris Kline** show a related phenomenological approach in a different, aniconic manner. Their reflecting paint creates a brief phosphorescence according to the lighting and the viewer’s movements — an effect that may also recall textiles and accessories used for night signage and safety.

Doubling, Inversion, Polarization/Optics, Heavenly Bodies, Extreme Distance — Reflection is also a factor in works by Pascal Grandmaison, which, although not included in the *Triennial*, would fit in with the works under discussion here. With *Void View*, 2010, for example, small fragments standing out against a carpet of ash mimic a star-studded night sky. *Half of the Darkness*, 2010, also evokes the sidereal world in a series of photos printed in negative (the procedure may allude to the photomechanical process of solarization). Exhibited on a horizontal plane, this work includes documentary photos from the Space Race, among other images. The theme of technological exploration of the cosmos appears elsewhere, in works like Grier Edmundson’s *Progress Progress VII*, 2008, and *Jan 26*, 2006, 2006, which uses the image of the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* that received tremendous

media exposure in 1986. In a cycle of performance works by
 00.02.74 **Charles Stankieveh** (*Ghost Rocket World Tour*, 2009–2010),
 the artist sets off fireworks on sites geographically far distant
 from one another that were selected for their connection
 with the history of geopolitical and technological networks.
 A similar iconography appears in Jessica Eaton’s photographs
 of an eclipse (*Shadow 9*, 2009).² The motif of the heavenly
 body recurs in François Morelli’s *Moon Walks*, to which I will
 00.01.30 return, and in videos by **Jean-Pierre Aubé**, such as *Titan and
 Beyond the Infinite*, 2007, based on information gathered
 00.01.10 when the probe *Huygens* landed on Saturn’s moon Titan.
 All these works deal with heavenly bodies from the point
 of view of extreme distances and temperatures. They engage
 an awareness that tests the means of its own knowledge and
 evaluates the potential range of its movements and experiences
 by reflecting on the symbolic and technological parameters
 of its breakthroughs and fulgurations.

Torrid Heights, Frigid Depths: Body, Psyche, Probes — In the
 same iconographic vein, representations of the sun appear in
 many recent productions, such as *31 soleils (Dawn Chorus)*,
 2010, by Jean-Pierre Aubé, and the latest works of

00.01.54 **Mathieu Beauséjour**.³ In particular, *Icarus ou Une allégorie
 de la chute du capitalisme*, 2010, shifts the register of
 interpretation to the realm of philosophy and psychoanalysis.
 In the drawings of this series, the sun’s light is mimicked by
 an effect of constricted radiance represented by innumerable,
 close-set, fine black lines. Elsewhere in the exhibition, a
 phonograph plays a NASA recording of sounds made by the
 sun, and beyond that, in *Acéphale*, 2010, our solar system’s
 star appears on the shoulders of the decapitated image
 of a reaper taken from a Yugoslavian bank note. Here, the
 dialectical representation of the work of economic, libidinal
 and symbolic forces uses the sun to bring out in the negative
 the figure of nihilism and its destructive potential.⁴ Using

00.02.66 cosmic iconography in a related way, **François Morelli** recently
 proposed a work composed of a series of works composed
 of blue flags bearing white disks representing the moon,
 which he wore on his feet during performative walks, *Moon
 Flags*, 2010 and 2011. The work calls upon what might seem
 like conflicting references: the heroically described historical
 episode of the first footstep on the moon, the motif of the flag
 trampled underfoot, the emblematic display of purity soiled or
 perforated, the inversion of high and low. But these references
 can be related to other aspects of Morelli’s work — for example
 the drawings of hood-puppets made of intertwined belts and
 certain cage-like wire structures — where everything points
 in the direction of a symbolic apparatus structured by the
 reflexive experience of a somatic performativity subjected
 to significant restrictive forces.

2. Or in the recent production
 of Suzanne Déry, where images
 of a comet — *Untitled (The Second
 Comet Hyakutake, March 25, 1996)*,
 2011 — and the moon — *Moon (Far Side
 of the Moon Never Seen from Earth.
 Viewed from Apollo 11 Spacecraft,
 1969)*, 2010–2011 — are subjected
 to the duplication of serialization.

3. And Pascal Grandmaison, who
 cuts out and formally multiplies the
 figure of this star in *Believing Cloud
 and Moment of Reason*, 2011.

4. For a psychoanalytical motif
 related to these symbolic and political
 processes, see the notion of the solar
 anus formulated in Georges Bataille,
 “The Solar Anus,” in *Visions of Excess:
 Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, trans.
 Allan Stoekl, with Carl R. Lovitts and
 Donald M. Leslie, Jr. (Minneapolis:
 University of Minnesota Press, 1985),
 p. 5–9. On the connection between
 anality and melancholy, see
 Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression
 and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez
 (New York: Columbia University Press,
 1989), p. 13–15. See also the well-known
 study of the melancholic trope in
 the visual arts by Raymond Klibansky,
 Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl: *Saturn
 and Melancholy: Studies in the History
 of Natural Philosophy, Religion, and
 Art* (New York: Basic Books, 1964).
 For an example of a literary work using
 the motifs of eroticism and death,
 the figure of the heavenly bodies
 and ascension toward the North in
 a structural framework that takes the
 form of a false scenario, itself a *mise
 en abyme* and pervaded with reflections
 on the technical possibilities of the filmic
 apparatus, see Hubert Aquin, *Hamlet’s
 Twin*, trans. Sheila Fischman (Toronto:
 McClelland and Stewart, 1979).

Movements (1). Scopic Mechanisms and Tracking Lines: The Individual Body—The multiplied rays of the sun, the lines of the furrowed disc (and by suggestion, of the field surveyed by the reaper) in Beauséjour’s *Icarus* are echoed in the rays of light cast in the exhibition space by the interplay of the sun and vertical slat blinds. The body, convoked in the works of Beauséjour and Morelli, makes a more explicit appearance in the recent pictorial practice of **Numa Amun** (00.01.26) (*Citadelle des sens*, 2007–2009), where the painted imitation of effects belonging to printmaking techniques like drypoint and etching subject the body to a network of radiating lines, nets and grids of interwoven lines that delineate and probe the great psychosexual and religious motifs of Western civilizations. Requiring exacting manual technique over a long period, these works recall at once the figure of Vesalius, heraldic tradition and Catholic visual culture. Further, a paradoxically intuitive technical aspect gives the device the practical qualities of a sort of erotic analysis. Several other recent productions tie the trope of linear multiplication to optical inquisition and transgression. With François Morelli (00.02.10) and **Mark Igloliorte**, the same interplay of multiplied cage-like lines helps define a restrictive experience of space and bodily movement. Certain works by **Frédéric Lavoie** (00.02.38) that draw upon the genre of the nature documentary (*À l’affût*, 2011; *À l’écoute*, 2011) also use invisible lines of sight that track multiple visual and aural perspectives, intermingled with the lines of movement of the subjects observed.⁵ The same type of attentively focused observation, acting as a “mock ambush,” is seen in the same artist’s video *Pourquoi marcher*, 2010 (and in *Kaleidoscope* by Lorna Bauer, where the theme of the hunt appears more clearly). In *Following* (00.02.58) *Following Piece*, 2008–2010, **Thérèse Mastroiacovo**, too, makes reference to a wider notion of tracking prey, though the register is considerably different. The work relies on one hand on iconographic and conceptual recourse to the archive (the work is attached to the observation of a previous work and “follows” its historical development, just as the series *Art Now* “follows” a certain type of monograph on contemporary art). On the other hand, these drawings require painstaking manual effort, and a good part of their aesthetic effectiveness derives from the ability to achieve, through a patient accumulation of attenuated graphic lines, an effect that mimics the tonal and mechanically reproducible nature of the photo-documentary capture of Vito Acconci’s body.

5. On the notion of linear flight, see Elias Canetti, “Flight Transformations. Hysteria, Mania and Melancholy,” in *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Continuum, 1981 [1973]) p. 342–348.

Movements (2). Structural Lines, Networks, Nomadism and Boundaries, Citizenship: The Collective Body—Several works also rely on a linear arrangement to suggest a delimitation of architectural, urban or territorial space that points in the direction of psycho-political motifs

and the technical management of the flow of the multitude.

- 00.01.50 With **Sylvain Baumann and Florine Leoni**, as with Valérie Kolakis, such devices (scaffolding, tubular structures, neon lights) explore the specific nature of architectural singularities and, to an even greater extent, the immediate terms of the phenomenological experience of space and the objects in it.⁶ In the work from **Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's** *Architectural Intersection. Relational Architecture 18*, 2011, powerful projectors arranged symmetrically on place des Festivals cast skyward an interplay of moving lines of light whose unpredictable configuration results from the active involvement of the public, evoking in an unexpected *détournement* the “cathedral of light” set up by Albert Speer in Nuremberg during the Nazi regime. Similarly, through a series of formal and linguistic references, the notion of the control of movement (and its “current”) appears in a recent project by
- 00.02.18 **Thomas Kneubühler** that investigates various North American social groups’ access to power. *Under Currents*, 2011, features the network of hydro-electric power lines stretched across northern Québec. The politically loaded notions of collective displacement and nomadism surface as well in works by
- 00.01.70 **Jacynthe Carrier** where, in order to evoke the body in the anthropological sense and its movements, the choreographic syntax of gestural relationships between individual bodies and their accessories can call upon the metaphor of electrical current (or a railway line) through the image of a lamp or an electrical tower. Similar concerns underlie many other recent projects, beyond the context of this triennial exhibition as well.⁷ Incidentally, it might also be mentioned that before being incorporated into this work, the projectors used by Lozano-Hemmer served in the surveillance of the U.S.-Mexican border. Works like *31C14* and *31C15*, 2009,
- 00.02.14 by **Chris Kline**, use actual maps, which the artist obscures with a dense network of lines painted in ink that highlight the information written in the margin. Finally, *Concertina*, 2011,
- 00.01.42 by **Steve Bates**, includes a length of concertina wire (barbed wire mounted with razor blades), which the artist uses as a broadcast antenna. Its signals are captured and transmitted by the surrounding radios.⁸ Here again, a linear apparatus contributes to modulating the notions of surveillance and control of individual and group movements.

Cold Current: Hot-Worked Cold, Cold-Worked Burns— It is perhaps no coincidence that the notions of dissemination, geographical exploration and coldness should gain in popularity at a time when everything seems to come closer, be recognized, become familiar, overpopulated and overheated—precisely through new global networks of communications “lines.” The new “exoticism” of cold, bare form may be understood in light of the paradoxical and at times strained relationship it

6. Another example of this type of device is *Soleil différé*, 2010, by Pascal Grandmaison, which in a cold tonality and temporality reuse the bare structure of the geodesic sphere built by Buckminster Fuller for Expo 67 (an echo, here, of the Cold War). The sphere was ravaged by fire in 1976.

7. See for example *Stanstead Project, or how to cross the border*, 2011, by Andreas Rutkauskas, presented at the Foreman Art Gallery, Bishop’s University, in 2011. It uses a linear motif to suggest the changes to conditions of mobility and security involved in setting up the boundary between the Eastern Townships and Vermont—*Boundary Map, Sheet No. 6, 1929*, 2011.

8. For videographic works on the reception of radio waves and an investigation of the notions of ownership and technico-legal and ideological boundaries, see Jean-Pierre Aubé, *Capture de sons V.L.F. sur la Baltique* and *V.L.F. Natural Radio—21.12.2002 Jerisjärvi, Finlande*, 2002.

00.02.62

maintains with the metaphor of the “hothouse” of human communities, indicating an ambivalence toward the socio-political projects that seek to develop it. Almost all the above-mentioned works are characterized by the coldness of a formal apparatus (defining extremely reduced visual syntaxes, as with formalism and conceptual art, or the aesthetic and sociological framework of the white cube), the material qualities and techniques that enable these devices (glass, mirrors, metal, photomechanical reproduction), or an iconography that illustrates it more explicitly (cosmic elements, northern landscapes). However, the cold is frequently “worked” by an interpenetrating heat. This is the case with *Almost Familiar Place*, 2008, by Valérie Kolakis, where Vaseline, an oleaginous substance normally used to soothe chaps and burns, is carefully applied to panes of glass to simulate frost. It is also the case with some works by **jake moore**, where the whiteness of the materials and the minimalism of the forms can paradoxically attach themselves to the notions of animal heat and cocooning. Yet, the general process described here is not that of a performative dialectic: elsewhere, cold spaces are crossed by rockets, comets, coloured planes and materials (Edmundson, Stankieveh, Biederman); virgin surfaces are punctured or stained with coldly executed burns (Morelli, Kolakis); and glass and mirror surfaces are shattered (Bauer, Kolakis). Electricity is often associated with cold through a paradoxical link in which it serves either as a source of heat or a cutting force.

Frozen Life— In conclusion, let us consider one more hypothesis: the figure of an aesthetic aggression targeted and coldly set in place, bearing on objects that could themselves be described as “cold” (all the more so if one thinks of the diversity of the technical apparatus that are targeted), should perhaps be related to the concept of a rapidly cooling social environment that would become more and more infernal,⁹ making existence gradually “impenetrable and rarefied.”¹⁰ At least it is in this perspective that some of the artistic practices discussed above may finally be described, recalling terms used by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk in the *Critique of Cynical Reason*: “When cynics make malicious jokes, when they give morality the cold shoulder, when they demonstrate an icy coldness with which they anaesthetize themselves against the amorality of the world, indeed when they even want to outdo its amorality — then the subjective coldness toward morality reflects a general social freezing over. The joke that comes out of the cold at least reminds us in its aggressivity of a more vital living. The ‘ice dogs’ still have the energy to bark and still possess enough bite to want to make things clear.”¹¹

Translated by Donald Pistoletti

9. The core of Dante’s *Inferno* is not a brasier but an icy place: “We passed on further, where the frozen mine/entombs another crew in greater pain;/these wraiths are not bent over, but lie supine.//Their very weeping closes up their eyes;/and the grief that finds no outlet for its tears/turns inward to increase their agonies://for the first tears that they shed knot instantly/in their eye-sockets, and as they freeze they form/a crystal visor above the cavity.” *The Inferno*, Canto XXXIII, ll. 91–99, trans. John Ciardi (New York: Mentor/New America Library, 1954). Guy Debord (in *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith [New York: Zone Books, 1995]), in describing contemporary life in the era of the spectacle (which is nothing but “the material reconstruction of the religious illusion” [p. 18]), also describes it as separated (p. 13, 18), dead, asleep (p. 18) and frozen (“the freezing of life” [p. 121, author’s emphasis]).

10. Debord, *Society*, p. 18

11. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 408.