

**Sara A. Tremblay, Tout t'empêche. Centre d'exposition de
l'Université de Montréal (en ligne / online)**
Sara A. Tremblay, Tout t'empêche

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ces impressions évoquent un ailleurs dès lors inaccessible, ce dont les artistes se font témoins.

Dans ce panorama fusionnent donc les qualités intrinsèques prêtées aux images : qualité informationnelle (fonction mimétique et indicelle, autrement dit documentaire, renforcée par la captation « anonyme » des topographies)



et qualité visuelle à teneur fictive. La composante documentaire est un dénominateur commun des travaux de Forest et Gagnon ; les documents d'archives scellent référent et représentation authentifiée, mettant à jour une identité territoriale qui leur permet d'identifier les politiques publiques. Cet intérêt recoupe ceux d'artistes s'inquiétant des dérives urbanistiques, tels que Melvin Charney, dont la responsabilité sociale décidait des projets multiformes. De même réfléchissait-il à la domination de la dimension fonctionnelle urbanistique au détriment du social, de même certaines de ses œuvres liaient réel et fiction. Ainsi, *Séquence aérienne* allie trames sociologique et poétique. Qualités et portées visuelles du travail sont étroitement liées au propos sociologique de Forest et Gagnon, celui de nous inciter à une appréhension sensible de notre environnement.

Gagnon-Forest Séquence aérienne

Here, the duo of Gagnon-Forest (Mathieu Gagnon and Mathilde Forest) presents a series of six large-format photographs (inkjet prints on film, backlit), articulated and paced by three dualities. Installed in the large windows on the lateral wall of Maison de la culture Claude-Léveillée, on Rue Boyer, three black-and-white photographs of topographic surveys alternate with three blue-shaded colour photographs of landscape elements.

The black-and-white images are based on 3D digitizations made by the City of Montreal using LiDAR low-altitude aerial technology. Gagnon-Forest then took over, using découpage techniques and changes of viewing angles, lighting, and contrast. Three sectors of the city are portrayed, from left to right: Montréal-Nord, Villeray, and Ahuntsic.

Gagnon-Forest's work falls at the intersection of visual arts (the training of both artists) and social sciences (Forest being a researcher associated with the Centre de recherche sur les innovations et transformations sociales). In response to issues that link space and the collective imagination, the duo's work skilfully weaves connections between sociological and aesthetic concerns. The dichotomies of the photographic panorama subtly underlie a visual narrative emblematic of our various relationships with the real (documentary or fiction).

The topographic surveys reveal a cadastral plan inherent to the master plans that structure space and act as indications of citizens' quality of life: predominance of urban layout designed for automobile mobility, narrow housing lots, limited access to nature, standardization of the built environment. Forest and Gagnon often ponder the "right" to space of citizens who have no choice but to suffer the constraints of urban living; for instance, the viewer can observe certain infrastructure elements, indifferently implemented, that fracture the landscape, instilling a sense of compartmentalization among the population. These images are presented as documents, as referential truth: the neutrality of their appearance highlighted by a linear graphic design evokes both the New Topographics movement, objectively interested in urban developments (one thinks of Lewis Baltz) and the geometric abstraction aesthetic model of a Malevitch or Mondrian – all in ordered precision and exerted control.

In alternation and opposition with these geometrized spaces, meddling with them, are the three blue-shaded images bearing topographic traces upon which organic motifs are superimposed. This is a transition to an experience of withdrawal from the object observed. What do we perceive? Mountain? Unique relief feature? Stretches of water? Vegetation? It's open to interpretation. The optical blurring provoked by the multiple layers in these images brings out the idea of transformation or ephemerality. These subjective compositions contrast with the objectivity of the digitized cadastral plans produced by the city. In the blue-shaded prints, the use of photogrammetry

creates an instability of perception, an impermanence, due in part to the granular quality perceived as a veil dropped between reality and its image, fostering the emergence of an ambience that might be called evanescent, poetic. The fuzziness blurs the hierarchy of the plans and forms a screen between the object portrayed and the observer. These point-cloud effects are the presumed result of the use of digital photogrammetry. A technique based on the parallax effect of hundreds of different points of view of the same object produces three-dimensional representations. The captures, translated into fixed images, thus appear to be slightly disintegrated, offering unclear contours. The eye is confused, seeking reference points in an imaginary projection. Observed at nightfall during pandemic times, these prints also evoke a now-inaccessible elsewhere, to which the artists are witness.

In this panorama, the intrinsic qualities ascribed to images merge: informational quality (mimetic and indicial function, otherwise known as documentary, reinforced by the "anonymous" capture of topographies) and visual quality with fictive content. The documentary component is a common denominator of Forest-Gagnon's work; archival documents embed referent and authenticated representation, uncovering a territorial identity that enables them to identify public policies. This interest overlaps with those of artists who are concerned about urban shifts, such as Melvin Charney, for whom social responsibility ruled over adaptable projects. Charney also reflected on the domination of the functional dimension over the social dimension in urban planning, and some of his works connected the real and fiction. Similarly, *Séquence aérienne* links sociological and poetic threads. Visual qualities and impacts are closely related to Forest-Gagnon's sociological thesis – that of encouraging us to be more aware of our environment. *Translated by Käthe Roth*

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Sara A. Tremblay

Tout t'empêche

Centre d'exposition de l'Université de Montréal, en ligne / online

Alors que nous sommes reclus.e.s dans nos régions, nos quartiers et nos foyers, la pandémie a fait de notre environnement immédiat un cadre de vie réduit auquel nous sommes constamment confronté.e.s. C'est ce que l'écrivaine

Cristina Comencini a appelé « une épreuve de vérité¹ ». Celle-ci a engendré un fort mouvement vers les régions² et un engouement marqué pour l'autonomie alimentaire³. L'œuvre *Tout t'empêche* de Sara A. Tremblay émerge dans ce

contexte bien singulier. C'est à l'occasion de la résidence virtuelle 3 fois 3, offerte par le Centre d'exposition de l'Université de Montréal, qu'elle développe un « essai virtuel » pour lequel elle met en scène son quotidien dans sa fermette d'Orford.

L'essai, créé par le truchement du réseau social Instagram, est ponctué de vidéos et de photographies de récoltes de fleurs, de fruits et de légumes, placés par la suite sur un grand canevas blanc

fixé à une grange et recouvrant une table. Au fil de ces « offrandes », posées sur ce qui s'apparente à un « autel », c'est la dimension ritualisée du geste qui se révèle. Denis Jeffrey appelle « rituel instituant⁴ » celui qui se crée dans le présent et dans l'exploration intime, en opposition à un rituel institué qui actualise une représentation collective déjà existante. Si ce rituel instaure, par la répétition, une relation singulière entre l'artiste et son milieu de vie, c'est par

le partage que ses actions symboliques, leur fonction première, « informent l'expérience vécue et lui donnent un sens⁵ ». *Tout t'empêche* y devient une performance, la mise en œuvre d'une disposition d'esprit qui rappelle celle de la décroissance, définie comme « un refus de la course à la production de marchandises⁶ ».

C'est aussi par la lenteur et l'appréciation sensorielle que l'artiste déjoue cet effet de marchandise. Non seulement on suscite le regard contemplatif en misant sur les aspects formels des courges spaghetti, des tournesols ou des variétés de haricots, mais les végétaux comestibles produisent des effets sur nos corps, ils sont « tournés vers les sensations⁷ ». Ainsi, on a presque l'impression de sentir, de goûter et de toucher les « bleuets de chez Robert » ou encore les tomates cerises dont la cueillette et la préparation culinaire nous sont dévoilées au sein de longues vidéos intimistes. Cela offre un contre-poids aux effets directs aussi bien qu'indirects de la COVID-19 comme l'anosmie et l'agueusie (perte d'odorat et de goût), la distanciation physique et l'impératif de ne rien toucher, des effets qui nous préviennent d'expérimenter le monde dans toutes ses dimensions sensorielles.

Par la prise en compte, au sein de ses « natures mortes », de la lumière, du vent, du gel, du son des insectes et des oiseaux à la brunante ou du cri des coyotes la nuit, *Tout t'empêche* révèle aussi la vie de l'écosystème et les interactions qui le constituent au fil du temps. Ainsi, une simple petite « fente dans les nuages » crée un effet singulier sur les glaïeuls rouges, ces fleurs qui annoncent l'automne et dont

la récurrence joue un rôle structurant dans l'œuvre — l'artiste affirme avoir planté 1000 bulbes de glaïeuls ! Dans le même ordre d'idées, on observe que les éléments présentés entament une deuxième vie après la récolte et la composition de l'artiste, soit celle de la décomposition ou de la dégustation. Cette vie prend forme dans la rencontre du « spécimen » avec d'autres organismes comme des insectes, des champignons ou encore avec notre système digestif, jusqu'à la totale disparition.

Pour plusieurs d'entre nous, la demeure est devenue un lieu de travail. À l'inverse, Sara A. Tremblay se demande « qu'arrive-t-il lorsque l'endroit où l'on va se réfugier, pour créer, devient la résidence principale⁸ ? » Il en résulte le partage du sensible au quotidien : le déploiement d'un lien tissé entre l'artiste et le milieu naturel, mais aussi avec sa nourriture. C'est par ce façonnement, cette création continue du devenir, que leur indissociabilité est rendue visible.

1 Cristina Comencini, « Chers cousins français », *Libération*, 12 mars 2020, tiré de <https://www.liberation.fr/livres/2020/03/12/coronavirus-chers-cousins-francais-par-cristina-comencini.1781454/> 2 Jean-François Guillet, « Exode des Montréalais vers les régions : un phénomène bien tangible », *La Voix de l'Est*, 24 juillet 2020, <https://www.lavoixdelest.ca/actualites/exode-des-montrealais-vers-les-regions-un-phenomene-bien-tangible-b02dccc8cc4c79bd0485e063a892d9b> 3 On remarque cet engouement, non seulement dans les discours lors des points de presse du gouvernement du Québec, mais aussi dans les articles de journaux. On note aussi la popularité accrue des jardinerie, des semenciers et des entreprises d'aménagement horticole. 4 Denis Jeffrey, *Jouissance du sacré, religion et postmodernité*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1998, p. 57. 5 *Idem*. 6 Yves-Marie Abraham, *Guérir du mal de l'infini. Produire moins, partager plus, décider ensemble*, Montréal, Éditions Écosociété, 2019, p. 22. 7 Carolyn Korsmeyer, « Esthétique indigeste », *Cités*, vol. 75, n° 3, 2018, p. 35. 8 Texte de présentation de Sara A. Tremblay sur le site Web du Centre d'exposition de l'Université de Montréal, <https://www.centre-expo-udem.com/3-fois-3-sara-a-tremblay>

Paule Mackrous est une autrice, historienne de l'art et hortultrice qui s'intéresse aux différents rapports que nous entretenons avec la nature. Elle collabore régulièrement, par ses écrits et ses recherches, à plusieurs revues culturelles, projets artistiques et galeries d'art actuel.

Sara A. Tremblay *Tout t'empêche*

While we are recluses in our regions, neighbourhoods, and homes, the pandemic has shrunk the parameters of our living environment, and we are constantly confronted with its limits. It's what author Cristina Comencini has called "a test of truth."¹ It has led to a wave of migration to rural regions² and a marked enthusiasm for food autonomy.³ Sara A. Tremblay's *Tout t'empêche* emerges in this unusual context. During the 3 fois 3 virtual residency organized by the Centre



Tout t'empêche, 2020

d'exposition de l'Université de Montréal, she developed a "virtual essay" about her daily life on her small farm in Orford.

The essay, exhibited via Instagram, is punctuated with videos and photographs of harvested flowers, fruits, and vegetables, which are then placed on a large piece of white canvas attached to a barn and covering a table. As these "offerings" are placed on what seems to resemble an altar, the ritualized dimension of the gesture is revealed. Denis Jeffrey calls that which is created in the present and in private exploration an "instituting ritual"⁴ – as opposed to an instituted ritual, which adds to a collective representation that already exists. If this ritual establishes, through repetition, a unique relationship between Tremblay and her living environment, it is through sharing that her symbolic actions, those that divert foods from their primary function, "inform lived experience and give it meaning."⁵ *Tout t'empêche* becomes a performance, the implementation of a state of mind that is reminiscent of degrowth, defined as "a rejection of the frenzied production of merchandise."⁶

Tremblay also evades the merchandise effect through slowness and sensory appreciation. Not only does she solicit the contemplative gaze by drawing on the formal aspects of spaghetti squashes, sunflowers, or varieties of beans, but the edible plants produce effects on our bodies, they are "turned toward sensations."⁷ So, we almost have the impression that we can feel, taste, and touch the "blueberries from Robert's place" or the cherry tomatoes whose harvesting and culinary preparation are unveiled to us through long, intimate videos. A counterweight is thus offered to both the direct and the indirect effects of COVID-19, such as anosmia and ageusia (loss of the senses of smell and taste), physical distancing, and the requirement to touch nothing – effects that prevent us from experiencing all the sensory dimensions of the world.

Because these "still lifes" encompass the light, the wind, the frost, the sounds of insects and birds at dusk and coyote cries at night, *Tout t'empêche* also reveals the life of the ecosystem and the interactions that constitute it over time. For



Il faut vraiment travailler fort pour se reposer, 2020, vidéo / video, 21:01 min

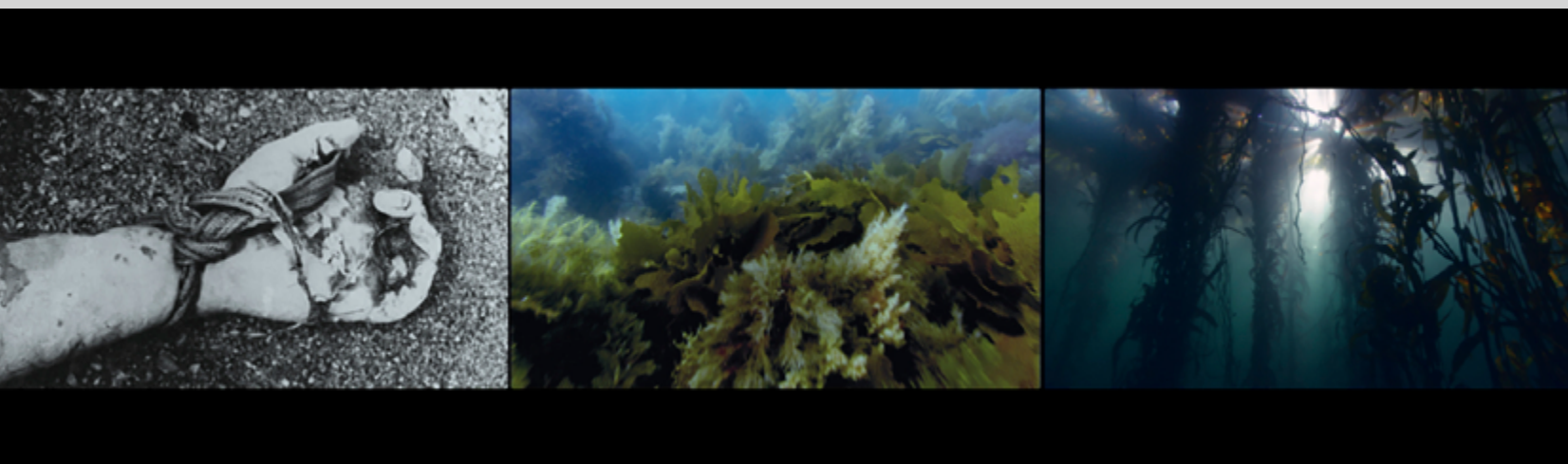
instance, just a small “gap in the clouds” creates a unique effect on red gladioli, flowers that announce autumn and whose recurrence in the images acts as a structuring element – Tremblay notes that she has planted more than a thousand gladiola bulbs! Similarly, we see that the things presented begin a second life after being harvested and used in Tremblay’s composition: that of decomposition or being tasted. This life takes shape in the encounter of the “specimen” with other organisms, such as insects or fungi, or with our digestive system, until they totally disappear.

For many of us, home has become workplace. Conversely, Tremblay wonders “what happens when the place where we take refuge, to create, becomes our main residence?”⁸ The result is the sharing of what is perceptible in daily life: the deployment of a connection that Tremblay weaves with the natural environment, and with her food. It is through this shaping, this continuous creation of the future, that their inseparability is made visible. *Translated by Käthe Roth*

1 Cristina Comencini, “Chers cousins français,” *Libération*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.liberation.fr/livres/2020/03/12/coronavirus-chers-cousins-francais-par-cristina-comencini.1781454/> (our translation). 2 Jean-François Guillet, “Exode des Montréalais vers les régions: un phénomène bien tangible,” *La Voix de l’Est*, July 24, 2020, <https://www.lavoixdelest.ca/actualites/exode-des-montrealais-vers-les-regions-un-phenomene-bien-tangible-b02dccc8cc4c79bd0485e063a892d9b>. 3 This enthusiasm is expressed not only in Quebec government press conferences but also in newspaper articles. Garden centres, seed companies, and landscapers have also grown in popularity. 4 Denis Jeffrey, *Jouissance du sacré, religion et postmodernité* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1998), 57 (our translation). 5 Ibid. (our translation). 6 Yves-Marie Abraham, *Guérir du mal*

de l’infini. Produire moins, partager plus, décider ensemble (Montreal: Éditions Écosociété, 2019), 22 (our translation). 7 Carolyn Korsmeyer, “Esthétique indigeste,” *Cités* 75, no. 3 (2018): 35. 8 Sara A. Tremblay, presentation text on the website of the Centre d’exposition de l’Université de Montréal, <https://www.centre-expo-udem.com/3-fois-3-sara-a-tremblay> (our translation).

Paule Mackrous is an author, art historian, and horticulturist who is interested in different relations that we maintain with nature. She regularly contributes, through writing and research, to cultural magazines, art projects, and contemporary art galleries.



Vertigo Sea, 2015, three-channel digital video HD installation / installation vidéo numérique HD à trois canaux, 48 min 30 s, National Gallery of Canada Musée des beaux-arts du Canada, courtesy of / permission de Smoking Dogs Films and / et Lisson Gallery

John Akomfrah

Vertigo Sea

The Design Exchange Trading Floor, Nuit Blanche, Toronto

2.10.2016

Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal

10.02.2021 — 4.04.2021

The sea, wild and wet, the womb that bore us, from which we slithered eons ago. We return to that birthplace – for crossings, sustenance, profit, and pleasure. Even as mysteries still dwell beneath those expansive liquid surfaces, our anthropocenic impulse seeks to control and, perhaps, destroy it.

John Akomfrah’s three-channel film essay *Vertigo Sea* (2015) provides an immersive environment in a panoramic span – a powerful montage of overlaid, overlapping still and moving images and sound. The words “Oblique tales on the aquatic sublime,” appearing on a solid blue field, open the film, serving as subtitle or description. It is the first text to punctuate Akomfrah’s sound-image orchestration and contribute to the film’s thematic grazing. Rhythmic audio pulses, suggesting a clock ticking or a hammer hitting, accompany and strengthen the idea of “aquatic sublime” – we are asked to consider the longue durée here: the primordial brains of

whales, the centuries of fertile abundance before humans began their industrial carnage. In the central image of the film’s first triptych, framed by two overhead views of the great blue sea, a hand cradles a clock. This is a universal story: the sea as site of history, of beauty and bounty, which, wrought by human forces, becomes a scene of disaster. This watery basin, once brimming with life, becomes, over human time, a graveyard in which our crimes are buried. *Vertigo Sea* offers a memorial for the enslaved, trafficked, and migrant bodies passing through it and centuries of pillaged sea life.

The installation’s large scale, combined with the cumulative effect of stunning and disturbing imagery, kindles responses of awe and humility. Despite its mostly historical content, it prompts viewers to consider their own contemporary relationship with the savagery perpetrated within and against that watery paradise. The imagery in *Vertigo*

Sea is sourced primarily from official archives, including the BBC Natural History Unit and the British Film Institute; its soundtrack marries a haunting composition by Tannis Jenhudson with recordings of roiling waves, raucous bird sounds, low whale calls, and human song – sea shanties merging with operatic strains – as well as voice-over narrations culled from literary, philosophical, and popular writings. An elegiac undercurrent of lament and mourning builds cumulatively as these elements mingle throughout the film.

Ghanaian-born British artist Akomfrah developed his creative process – dialectical montage inspired by politically engaged Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein – during his many years making post-colonialist activist films within the Black Audio Film Collective. *Vertigo Sea* pushes these interests further, into broader political, environmental, and global critiques.

Historical references to sea tragedy and destruction surface and resurface throughout the film: the contemporary refugee crisis (the film was inspired by the 2007 sinking of a migrant boat in Mediterranean); the triangular African slave trade in which captives avoided servile labour on colonial lands only by drowning at sea; the crossings of the sea by Britain and other nations as they colonized and exploited other peoples

and places; the modern industrial massacre of sea creatures through whaling and fishing for human consumption; the sport-hunting of polar bears; the sea as disposal site for disappeared Argentinian and other political dissidents; the mercury-poisoned water that debilitated humans, fish, and animals on the coast of Minamata, Japan; the atomic explosions in Bikini Atoll performed as US military experiments; and all this partly overwritten by the wondrous beauty and power of the sea itself – giant aquamarine curls of waves and undulating sea creatures.

The film’s aesthetic and philosophical references encompass a range of visual and written texts. Because the sea was thick with nefarious traffic in the nineteenth century, Romantic artists painted scenes of maritime tragedies. Théodore Géricault’s painting *Raft of the Medusa* (1819), depicting victims cast off by an incompetent captain, is reimagined in recent footage of overloaded migrant boats in the Mediterranean. Staged scenes of drowned African slaves washed ashore reference another historical atrocity, recorded by J. M. W. Turner’s *The Slave Ship* (1840), in which 132 captives were thrown overboard from the slave ship *Zong* so that the ship’s owner could collect the insurance monies. Reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich’s paintings that express the sublime, staged scenes