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Deferred Reactions: ATSA and Ephemeral Landscapes

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Montréal DEFERRED REACTIONS: ATSA AND EPHEMERAL LANDSCAPES

In 1987, Krzysztof Wodiczko provided one of the most succinct critiques of “art in public places” as a form of political legitimization. Public art, he wrote, should engage in strategic challenges to the psychopolitical and economic operations of the city.¹ Describing the work of the new avant-garde as critical intelligence, he proposed critical collaboration with institutions of mass media in order to win time and space and raise consciousness.

Around that time, some of the most successful models of city-wide public art were *Chambres d'amis*, organised in Ghent in 1986 and bringing together more than 50 artists, *Skulptur Projekte* of 1987, a project comprised of more than 70 interventions in the city of Münster, and *Places with a Past*, a series of site-specific works organized for Charleston's Spoleto Festival in 1991. According to Johanne Lamoureux, part of what defined such projects was a shift away from site specificity towards the time of the event

and the time it took for the spectator to travel from one place to another.² Further defining the type of consumption involved in these city-wide arts festivals, Lamoureux explained how the motifs of the eighteenth-century picturesque and nineteenth-century flânerie were enlisted as features of the museologization of the city.³ Miwon Kwon explained this new work as part of a shift in site-specific practice away from phenomenological concerns and institutional critique and towards a discursive understanding of site. Discursively determined, the site becomes a “fragmentary sequence of events and actions through space ... a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist.”⁴

The recuperation of the external form of such projects became something of a commonplace in the '90s. One such project was developed by the Montreal-based group ATSA, a non-profit organisation founded in 1997 and dedicated to “urban interventions in the form of installations, performances and realistic displays that

are witness to social, environmental and nationalist aberrations.” ATSA, which stands for *Action Terroriste Socialement Acceptable*, has as its mandate a questioning of urbanism that restores the citizen’s place in the public realm depicting it as a political space open to social debate and discussion. ATSA proposes a non-hermetic art activism that allows for “sustainable social development.”⁵ The group’s most well-known project to date is called *FRAG on the Main* (2002) a series of 32 graphic displays installed at various addresses along Montreal’s Saint-Laurent Boulevard, a.k.a. “the Main.” This visual walking tour functions as witness to the social, cultural and economic history of the street and some of the personalities that are associated with its *locus genii*.

A similar project was organized more recently by Ephemeral Landscapes, a temporary urban art project for Montreal’s Mont-Royal Avenue. Ephemeral Landscapes also describes its projects as “urban interventions,” in this case designed to “surprise and amuse citizens.”⁶ The only successful piece among the winners of the 2007 contest was *21 visages en tête*, created by the team of architects, Brière, Gilbert + associés. Imitating the new stencil graffiti tactic of using streets as paint surfaces, the project features sidewalk images of 21 historical personalities that have given their names to the streets along Mont-Royal Avenue: Berri, Mentana, Fabre, Marquette, Papineau, DeLorimier.

As self-proclaimed “interventions,” these projects ignore almost anything that might constitute an avant-garde of public art: the use of mass media networks for the introduction of critical content, the interruption of the passive reception of monumental history, the critique of historicism as well as the critique of the nostalgic presumption that public space was once whole but is now lost to capitalist modernisation, a social aesthetic that challenges processes of reification. While *FRAG on the Main* is far less sectarian in content than *21 visages en tête*, it is nevertheless

little more than the photoshopped artefacts of ethnic pride and the memorabilia of local chambers of commerce. Not surprisingly, one of the major donors of the project, besides the City of Montréal and the Province of Québec, is the *Société du développement du boulevard St-Laurent*. Unfortunately *FRAG* is to public art what a primer in social history is to *Saint-Urbain’s Horseman*.

While neither of these two groups may be aware of this, an important precursor to their work is REPOhistory’s 1992 *Lower Manhattan Sign Project*, a series of 39 historical markers designed as tactical interventions but also made with a general public in mind. In contrast to the historicism of the previously mentioned works, *Sign Project* was an engagement in what the philosopher Michel Foucault called “effective history,” a displacement of fixed historical referents that is complexly understood in relation to an “embodied” living memory. REPOhistory is a collective that was formed in 1989 as a study group of artists, teachers and activists.⁷ Unlike ATSA and Ephemeral Landscapes, REPOhistory is clearly engaged in the field of radical cultural production, both past and present. REPOhistory enlisted the assistance of public agencies only, including the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, the Municipal Art Society, the New York Historical Society, the Department of Transportation and the New York City Council. This may have helped them to introduce the critical content of many of their signs. For example, one of the signs identifies the location of the eighteen-century slave market and indicates that the City of New York was at that time the second largest urban slave centre in the U.S. New York City slave markets were not indicated by any historical markers until REPOhistory’s intervention. A sign for stock market crashes by member Jim Costanzo, “Advantages of an Unregulated Free Market Economy,” marks the site of the New York City stock exchange. It shows a businessman falling/jumping from the heights of his lost fortune – a reminder of the precariousness of capitalism.

In comparison with ATSA and Ephemeral Landscapes, REPOhistory took the term intervention seriously. The lesson to be drawn here is not the fact that good ideas and critical content are soon borrowed by less challenging artists, but the more disconcerting idea is that thanks to state grant agencies, some forms of interventionist public art have been whittled down to a kind of “Sunday painting”. This is not an argument against state funding for the arts, however, but a critique of artistic practices that take on some of the worst features of neoliberalization, where the local is subsumed by the empty capitalist mechanisms of transnationalism.

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Marc James Léger holds a PhD in Visual & Cultural Studies from the University of Rochester. He has published critical essays on public sphere issues in ‘Parachute,’ ‘Afterimage,’ ‘Fuse,’ and the ‘Canadian Journal of Film Studies.’ He has recently edited a collection of writings by Bruce Barber for YYZ Books (forthcoming 2007) and is at work on a collection of essays concerning neoliberalism and contemporary art institutions.

NOTES

¹ Krzysztof Wodiczko, ‘Strategies of Public Address: Which Media, Which Publics?’ in Hal Foster, ed. *Discussions in Contemporary Art #1* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1987) 42.

² Johanne Lamoureux, ‘Le musée en pièces détachées,’ *Public #1* (Winter 1988) 53-70.

³ Johanne Lamoureux, ‘Exhibitionitis: A Contemporary Museum Ailment,’ in *Theatergarden Bestiarium: The Garden as Theater as Museum* (Cambridge/New York: The MIT Press/The Institute for Contemporary Art, P.S. 1 Museum, 1990) 124.

⁴ Miwon Kwon, ‘One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity,’ *October #80* (Spring 1997) 95.

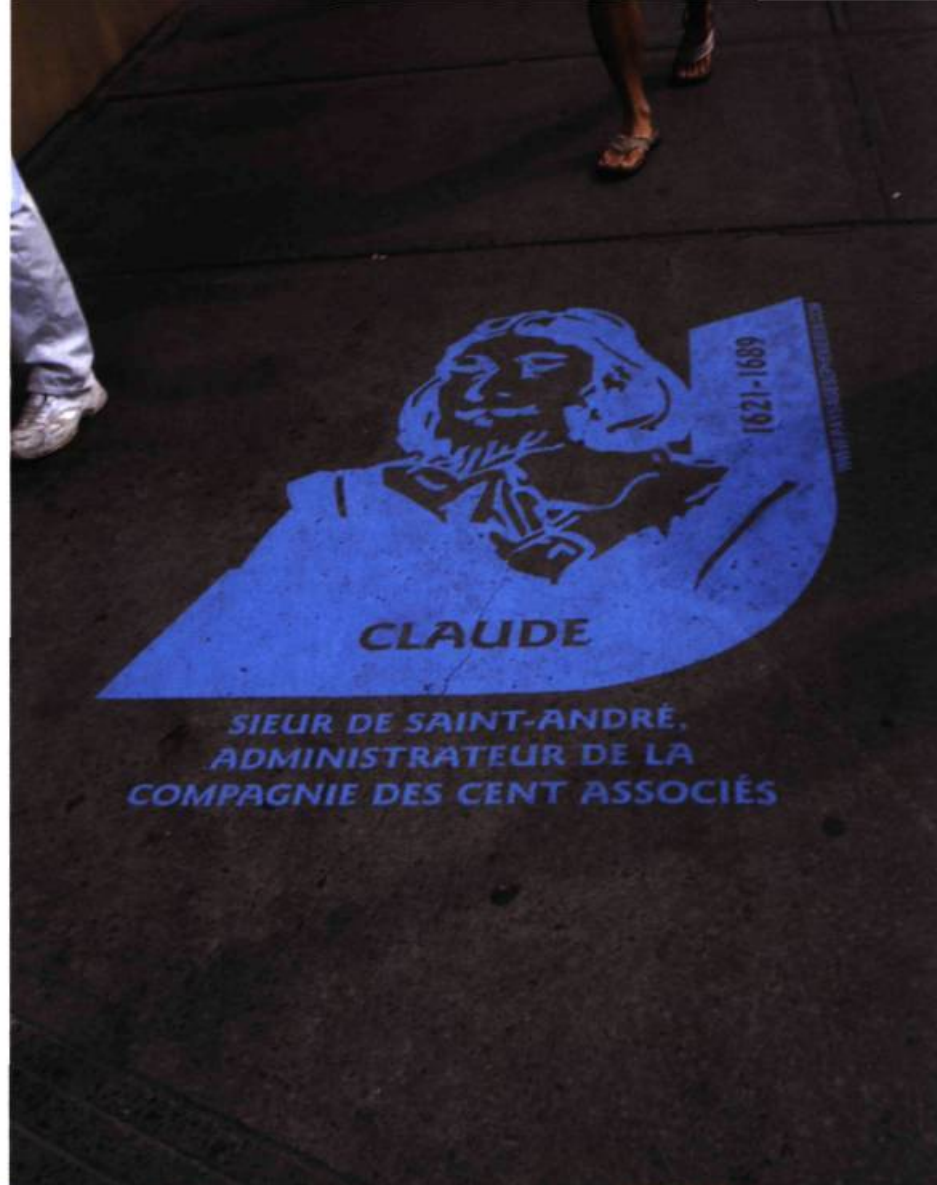
⁵ The website for *Action Terroriste Socialement Acceptable* is www.atsa.qc.ca.

⁶ The website for *Paysages Éphémères* is www.paysagesephemeres.com.

⁷ The REPOhistory website can be found at www.repohistory.org.



Brière, Gilbert + associés,
21 visages en tête, 2007.
Ephemeral Landscapes.
Photo by Marc Léger



Jim Costanzo, REPOhis
Advantages of an Unregu
Free Market Economy, 19
Lower Manhattan Sign Pro
Courtesy of REPOhis

