

ETC



The Body as Glass

Lois Andison. La Centrale, Montreal. May 30 to June 21, 1992

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Number 20, November 1992, February 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/35990ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Molter, M. (1992). Review of [The Body as Glass / Lois Andison. La Centrale, Montreal. May 30 to June 21, 1992]. *ETC*, (20), 37–39.

THE BODY AS GLASS

Lois Andison. La Centrale, Montreal. May 30 to June 21, 1992



Lois Andison, *The Body as Glass*, 1992. Installation view.

“Only dying men see God” – “The Body as Glass. I am on the surface and readably transparent at the same time.” Lois Andison is a Toronto artist - via Montreal and, originally, Smiths Falls, Ontario.

A glass table, surrounded by stones carved by the river, selected and placed by the artist one by one; this piece functions as an altar. Under the subtitle *Messe pour un temps présent* (Mass for a present tense), Stéphane Aquin describes the installations as: “très nettes, très composées également, qui ont pour thème la transparence ou l’opacité des êtres, et la survivance des notions chrétiennes du sacrifice et du salut dans l’univers urbain d’aujourd’hui.”¹

Andison describes her experience on a first visit to la Centrale in February to introduce herself to the space that her installation and studio work in progress would inhabit in June. Given the transparency of the work, she later covered the windows for her installation with a transparent covering, except for a

single rectangle, through which, on viewing the altar of the “crown of thorns”, we see in the distance the cross of the chapel of Montreal’s oldest hospital, the Hôtel Dieu.

The piece also functions as a hospital. On the three by eight feet glass table top we find bowls filled alternately with ashes and healing oil flanking a crown of thorns. The crown of thorns is sculpted from hollow pyrex tubing filled with iodine that gives the appearance of blood and antiseptic, having paradoxically poisonous properties, a reference to a last supper, of a liquidity versus death. Resting in preparation on the three glass shelves, the spine of the table, are folded white sheets and a fine woven blanket. Found materials and technology: suffering, forgiveness and humanity.

Andison suggests: “If I use Christian symbolism, and I do, it is not predicated on the notion of heaven and hell. From the moment of conceptualization the course of significance behind the crown of thorns was to reveal the inner fluid. Housed within the glass tub-

ing iodine has the appearance of blood. It functions as a sign, and in this way it locates the body – the capacity of the body is to bleed. It is life and death within all of us.”

Andison refers to statements such as that by Richard Martin: “The city is an aesthetic expectation and plan, but the nature of that plan is also idiosyncratically and socially determined that art and the city may seem irreconcilable, even while they are metaphors for one another.”²

Andison expands: “As creatures of social organization, the city reveals a lot about how we order ourselves. Houses provide enclosure, shelter (the private); the streets reveal, disclosure (the public). On the streets you observe the huge homeless population, the dislocation, the desire and from time to time, the anonymity.”

Through the exhibition at La Centrale, Andison focuses on “the personal and social predicament of physical and spiritual need pathologically bound to the urban complex”.

Andison initiates her work from a written text that she composes during a period of meditation and conceptualization. This text is incorporated into the exhibition through two LED (Light Emitting Diode) programmable message display signs flashing in English and in French throughout and in the middle or central area of the installations.

“When there are no more magicians and you can’t find the messiah, can I bring you to the water, can I bring the river to you, for I’d like to give you something to hold onto.”

“Je suis faite de verre et tu me lis toute à nu, c’est pourquoi j’ai pris ce voile, car je suis faite de verre et tu me lis toute à nu, tu retraces ma paupière de ton regard en coin”.

The installations are open; materials reflect the same space and convey the textual references to veiled imagery, longing, ritual, and revealing and concealing rites of passage. The text and photo-images communicate the need of the individual to acquire a position of self-determination and meaning within the shifting boundaries of social and economic conduct. Andison interprets: “While the site is the body, it is the city that shows us what it means to be human.”

Andison refers to Joseph Campbell: “Life is without meaning unless you bring meaning to it”.³

“The initial impulse to move into the area of installation hinged on the desire to dissolve the boundaries between art making and life experience. Accordingly, the materials I used were materials sensitive to change, decay and transformation.”

Cotter writes: “The sense of disorientation, ‘dislocation’”, a term which Richard Stow, curator for contemporary art at the MOMA, “posited as being a characteristic, even the characteristic of our time.” Cotter interrogates: “Why is the installation form popular again? Perhaps its aura of being outside the milieu of the saleable object makes it attractive to an art world whose mercantile machinery is stalled”.⁴

the body as glass / in the hour of need investigates the personal and social predicament of physical and spiritual need pathologically bound to the urban experience. It communicates the need of the individual to acquire a position of self-determination and meaning within the shifting urban complex⁵.

Discussing “Hiatus and Identification”, Kristeva writes: “What remains is the tightrope – as the represented body of an economical, sparing, graphic rendition of pain held back within the solitary meditation of artist and viewer. To such a serene disenchanting sadness, reaching the limits of the insignificant corresponds a painterly art of utmost sobriety and austerity, is it still possible to paint when one identifies not with the desire but with severance, which is the truth of the psychic life, a severance which is represented by death in the imagination and which melancholia conveys as a symptom?”⁶

Walking on water

We move on past window box photos; photos of a veiled androgynous, shaved head image, bordered by hats filled with ashes; and past a wall of metal funnels filtering ash onto the concrete floor (as we filter our experience), suspended among shoes cast in aluminum, hovering and filled with frankincense, camomile and veti-vert oil. Below are placed branches from weeds of the urban parking lots of Toronto that grow against building walls and are familiarly called Trees of Heaven:

“We are receptacles, simply stated, living things, weeds in ash, Trees of Heaven growing in urban squalor. I am interested in working with impermanent

materials, putting them into relationships that paradoxically give them poetic meaning – inspiration through chance – with a vocabulary of objects with their innate meanings and with permanence in meaning.”

“Basically I am a gatherer. The leaves in the installation *reciprocal / receptacle* drew my attention because of their spiny, rib like quality and their movement in the wind. I was writing the text at the time and their gesture seemed to imply a bowing. So I gathered the dry leaves and a gardener friend later told me they are called ‘tree of heaven’ – how appropriate.”

We turn from this yet “Untitled work” and come through a separation of suspended opacity in the gallery, a sort of veiled material separation, and reach an installation of a net suspended and hovering over a silk-like sea of hand woven green net with a pair of glass shoes. Both have been fashioned, woven and cast by the artist and placed into this relationship.

In *The State of the Art: Ideas and Images in the 1980's* Sandy Naire refers to a comment by Anthony Storr : “The strength of... artists and (their) possession of a technical skill enables (them) to rise above the merely personal, and to relate (their) personal deprivations to the discontents implicit in being human. We are all deprived; we are all disappointed; and therefore, in some sense, idealists. The need to link the real and the ideal is a perpetual tension, never resolved so long as life persists, but always productive of new, attempted solutions.”⁷

Passages are set up as if coming around a corner; a diffusion, the net in hand-woven diamond sections from delicate hand-picked cotton; the shoes pre-cast in bees wax, vulnerable and translucent, and then recast in an even more translucent opaque glass. The ability to continue while confronted with the reality of human existence. Relationships within humanity, fragmented in time and in personal histories.

“Un filet de pêche accroché au plafond, s’être derrière deux voiles transparents, tissu rêche et formes éphémères se mariant dans cette installation qui semble léviter au-dessus d’une mer invisible. On pense tout de suite au miracle de Jésus-Christ marchant sur l’eau mais les chaussures masculines grossièrement taillées dans le verre qui me font penser à une célèbre toile de Van Gogh, tentent de briser ce silence assourdissant qui entoure cet espace cloisonné et limpide, métaphore d’une promenade transcendante et énig-

matique à travers la parole de Dieu.”⁸

We all still need to be healed – the social fabric of society repaired: “and I made this for you, cause I want to give you something, but it’s all so fluid, how much slippage can you bear?”

MIKE MOLTER

NOTES

1. AQUIN, Stéphane; *Chassey / Centrale / Wallace, Voir*, Montréal, 11 ou 17 juin 1992, p. 20.
2. MARTIN, Richard; *The New Urban Landscape*, exhibition held at the World Financial Centre, Battery Park, Manhattan, Oct. 14 through Dec. 31, 1988 catalogue. Olympia and York(USA) and Drentell Doyle Partners, New York, 1990, p. 18.
3. OBSER, Diane K.; *A Joseph Campbell Companion: Reflections on the Art of Living*. Harper Collins, New York, 1991, p. 16.
4. COTTER, Holland; *Dislocating the Modern, Art in America*, Jan. 1992, p. 104.
5. ANDISON, Lois; *Walking on water - The body as glass / in the hour of need*, La Centrale, exhibition statement, 30 mai ou 21 juin, 1992.
6. KRISTEVA, Julia; *Zone: Fragments for a History of the Human Body*. Urzone Inc. New York, 1989, p. 264.
7. NAIRE, Sandy; *State of the Art: Ideas and Images in the 1980's*. Chato and Windus, London, 1987, p. 104.
8. CRON, Marie-Michèle; *Comme le reflux océanique du vide*, Le Devoir, jeudi 18 juin 1992, p. B-7.