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Natural History as Death's Jewel Boxes

Marie-Josèphe Vallée, *Constructions naturelles*, Édifice Belgo, Espace 524, Montréal. September 10-27, 1998

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ACTUALITÉS / EXPOSITIONS

MONTREAL

NATURAL HISTORY AS DEATH'S JEWEL BOXES

Marie-Josèphe Vallée, *Constructions naturelles*, Édifice Belgo, Espace 524, Montréal. September 10 - 27, 1998



Marie-Josèphe Vallée, *Histoire naturelle 10*, 1996. Collage of bones on velvet lined jeweler's show-case. Photo: M.-J. Vallée.

“**A** city changes”, Baudelaire reminds us : *the face of a city changes more quickly alas ! than the mortal heart*. The Belgo building is a baudelairian setting; ideal for Marie-Josèphe Vallée's *Natural Histories* as the “ghosts” of the rag trade are everywhere present; encouraging, artistically, one's thoughts towards mortality.

Her recent work consists of three 6 foot high totems : elementarist montages, composed of many different materials and mediums, representing an indivisible body of ideas. Placed in a large show-case are ostensible symbols of death (bones, aged in the ground, the bony chalkiness of plasterboard) juxtaposed with De Stijl icons of geometrical pure color fields, cheek by jowl with archeological fragments. The latter are presented as square elements cut out from some vast architectural low relief model depicting Montreal in 1846.

Of bones and stones

Educated both as artist and architect,¹ Marie-Josèphe Vallée has worked since 1987 on the theme of the classical tradition embedded in contemporary art and architecture. Her older works include memorable geometrical arrangements of bones in jewelry show-cases. The artist puts a critical gloss on neo-modernist imagery by evoking the love-hate relationship of our western world for abstract geometry (and its recent *reincarnation* as modernism's *pure form*). Her work constitutes a *natural history* of the idea of abstract artistic expression deriving ultimately from architectural discourses.

The particular mix of representational techniques which she uses seems to be necessary to this subject matter. She speaks of drawing, the academic construction of painting and engraving within the theme of the geometrical *straight-jacket* that (in the name of reason) the architectural metaphor imposes on western thought.

Take for instance the “totem” *Montréal Rouge : rue de la Gauchetière* (1998). Vallée's particular way of looking at painting and the issues of art and society is here clearly grounded in her understanding of the profoundly abstract nature of the art of building. This “totem” juxtaposes citations of Van Doesburg's *Counter composition V* (1924) with a low relief model of Cane's 1846 map of Montreal in which fragments of bones have been inserted. One is confronted by the commonality of these two representations signified by the overlapping red field, and one cannot escape the ramification that both representations are based on the same geometrical, intellectual and metaphysical foundations.

The architectural metaphor in the arts

Architecture was considered the mother of the arts precisely because its *modus operandi* is the abstract representation of nature. In the 19th century music became a metaphor for the immutable and abstract universal values of art and the early 20th century artist evokes architecture once again as a way of conceptualizing, artistically, the relation of man to his built environment. In this sense, Theo Van Doesburg, in collaborating with Cornelis Van Eesteren on the axonometric representation of elementarist spatial

aesthetics, was a major factor in the formation of the modernist idea of the *naturally* expressive abstract qualities of space, form and color.

The avant-garde of the early 20th century, hoping to reveal the eternal principles of the arts, fell back paradoxically on the “architectural skeleton” of the classical teaching of *disegno* (composition) in order to reveal the universal values of art and, ostensibly, to *finish* with academic rules once and for all. They were echoing the classical idea that drawing (*disegno*) is the rational *skeletal* whole of the composition and color the *flesh* covering it (a potentially *irrational*, subjective and sentimental surface).

Thus, drawing, seen as the foundation of form, was regulated by classical Euclidean geometry and proportion. The pure conceptuality of this distinction, and a striking reminder of the sexual prejudices of this period becomes clear when in 1880, Charles Blanc in his *Grammaire des Arts Du Dessin, Architecture, Sculpture, Peinture*, was able to write that “Drawing is the male sex; color the female sex of art”². All Beaux-Arts teaching of the arts used life drawing classes to analyze and abstract Nature as *La Belle Forme* initiating the young architects and artists to an understanding of an anthropomorphic conception of God as “the Architect of the Universe”.

The idea of the supremacy of the abstract over the contingent and the concrete was never really abandoned by modern art. What, after all, is abstract art if it is not exactly this reduction of a particular form of human experience to geometry, proportion and color? Are we not often invited to understand that abstract art “no longer tries to imitate nature but expresses itself by its own particular means: form, color, volume, line, rhythm, surface organization...”³

If this metaphysical *hidden skeleton* of the classical tradition has never been abandoned, it clearly becomes a *revealed skeleton* in the *neoplasticism* of Van Doesburg and Mondrian.

Moreover, these same ideas will be taken up in modern architecture by Le Corbusier and the teachings of the Bauhaus. The *informal* cannot, it seems, be tolerated by modern architecture any more than could the academic formalisms of the dogmatic Beaux-Arts teaching of composition.

Pure geometry as ideal object

In modern painting, the *originality* of artists allowed them to choose their own compositional rules for each individual work. Kandinsky wrote that “this total refusal of the habitual forms of “Beauty” enables us to see, as sacred, all artistic processes which allowed the artist to express his personality”⁴. The idea of *expression* supersedes *emulation* as the operative idea of teaching the arts; but it left behind the skeletal residue of *mimesis*. The question of the material and the structures of expression, can therefore be given a political significance. Painting conceals it but the skeleton is its truth.

What roles do the references to abstract art play in Vallée’s work? First of all, a map is a geometric abstraction; the grid-iron of the city is as abstract as a Van Doesburg “counter composition”. The city is founded on the myth of the moral essences of life, in classical thought, right up to the early 20th century⁵ the good (rational) city should be basic geometry — the grid-iron, *pure* objectivity.

A subversive reminder of what is at stake here is given to us by a quotation taken from *Against Architecture* by Denis Hollier and posted on the wall of the exhibition. “In many primitive societies the skeleton marks the moment of the second death – a death that is completed, clean, and properly



Marie-Joséphine Vallée, Montréal blanc. Rue de la Commune, 1998. Wood construction, concrete, wax on polystyrene with bones; 169 x 44 cm.

immutable: that which survives putrefaction and decomposition. The skeleton, as architectural, is the perfect example of an articulated whole. Modern painting rediscovers death in its first guise of the human figure's decomposition, an incomplete death, a mortal wound to form, a rotting corpse rather than a skeleton. Rotten painting."⁶

Rotten city?, decomposition, the first death of the traditional city? The good and the clean versus the nineteenth century's often declared anxiety for the vast dirty industrial city, "cleanliness is next to godliness", seem to us today, typical expressions of 19th century obsessions.

One may question the potentially intellectual nature of these critical ideas. Are these totems just more post-modern/deconstructive formal games? But how does one meditate publicly on the political role played by humanist ideas in contemporary art if it is not by directly addressing forms of representation that avoid the naïve replication of abstraction?

Vallée's work spanning ten years, deals then with geometry, *de-composition*, memory, modernity and death. Here *deconstruction*, being a somewhat less negative term than the Nietzschean "reversal" or the Heideggerian "destruction" of western metaphysics, "signifies a project of critical thought whose task is to locate and "take apart" those concepts which serve as the axioms or rules for a period of thought, those concepts which command the unfolding of an entire epoch of metaphysics".⁷ One must admit that Marie-Josèphe Vallée's works of deconstruction are, like Derrida's, undecided between active and passive roles. More importantly however, they are the "middle voice" that speaks of an *operation*, namely abstract art, that is not yet seen as an *operation*. If geometry and abstraction are not seen as constituting the metaphysical base of the abstract arts they become naïve representation.

Vallée's work, if given the time, has a strangely emotional effect on the observer. The accumulation of references and somewhat unexpected juxtapositions of abstract geometry and figurative reminders of *absence* (*our* life, *our* death) with that of the city, all do their special work on our sensibilities. In this sense one looks forward to the further plastic development of Marie-Josèphe Vallée's work. This concentration on the "body politics" of the flesh and the skeleton, (an essential metaphor of the city), is I think, a valuable outlook both for architecture and for contemporary art.

ALAN KNIGHT

NOTES

- 1 She has a Fine Arts diploma from Lille School of Art in France and is also a graduate of the School of architecture of the Université de Montréal.
- 2 Charles Blanc, in his *Grammaire des Arts Du Dessin. Architecture, Sculpture, Peinture*, p. 21. This sentence appears in the chapter DU DESSIN ET DE LA COULEUR", in French it is : *Le dessin est le sexe masculin de l'art; la couleur en est le sexe féminin.*
- 3 Robert Atkins in *Petit Lexique de l'Art Moderne, 1848-1945*, "Abstraction", p. 43. Translation, AJK.
- 4 *Du spirituel dans l'art et dans la peinture en particulier*, Édition Denoël/Gonthier, 1969, Paris, p. 67. Translation AJK.
- 5 Cf. Joseph Rykwert's *The Idea of a Town*, MIT press, 1988.
- 6 Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The writings of Georges Bataille*, MIT press, 1989, p. 52; for the English translation of *La prise de la Concorde*, Éditions Gallimard, Paris, 1974).
- 7 As J. P. Leavey puts it in his preface to *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: an introduction*, par Jacques Derrida. University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1989, page 4. My emphasis.



Marie-Josèphe Vallée, *Montréal rouge*, 1998. Wood construction, concrete, wax on polystyrene with bones, 169 x 44 cm.