Document generated on 10/12/2024 6:14 a.m.

Espace Sculpture

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Number 63, Spring 2003

Art & publicité
Art & Publicity

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/9208ac

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)
1923-2551 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this document

(2003). Maurice Lemieux. *Espace Sculpture*, (63), 46–46.

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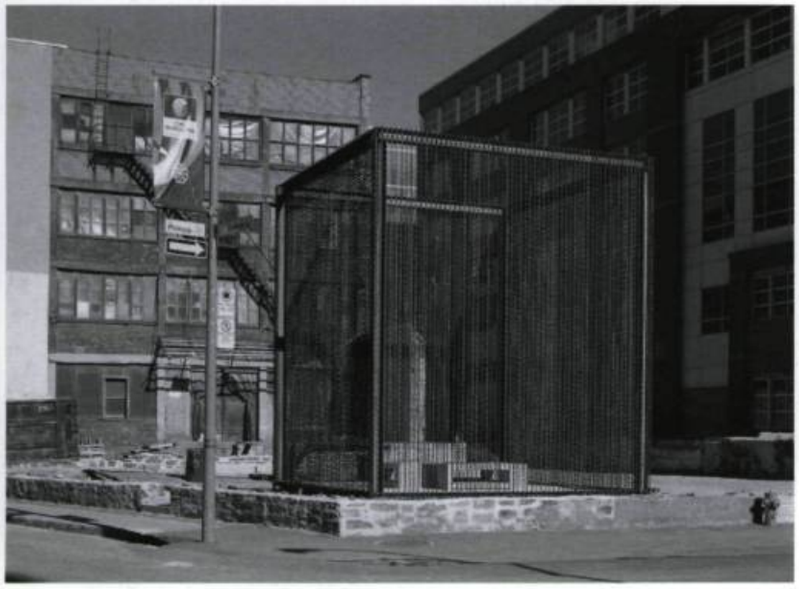
Chain Reactor

MARKETA JAROSOVA

In the midst of Montreal's old industrial district stands a massive outdoor installation. In the form of a cube and constructed of rusty beams and thick chains, *Chain Reactor* encloses four benches and a hearth of stone. Erected on the corner of Prince and Wellington streets, the work almost blends in with its surroundings. Its juxtaposition to red brick buildings creates an ideal environment and results in a harmonious whole, further reinforced by the work's clear reference to industrialization.



Chain Reactor was built by Marco Casagrande and Sami Rintala for the 3rd *Biennale de Montréal*, 2002. Finnish architects and artists based in Helsinki, Casagrande and Rintala have participated in several international exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennal 2000 and the Yokohama Triennial 2001. The duo is best known for exterior architectural installations that comment on social and environmental issues, but are also prominent in the design of theatre and dance settings and the creation of multimedia art.

Chain Reactor consists of a 10-by-10-foot cube of steel whose four sides are formed by vertically hanging chains. In the centre of the sand covered ground of the interior rests a hearth surrounded by four benches of local limestone. The artists wanted to use the most common stone of the Montreal region, a good means to offer the visitors the familiar and thus make them feel comfortable with the idea of stepping inside. Wood and matches were placed underneath these benches, inviting visitors sit, make a fire, and socialize. However, the thick chains create a cage-like impression, making Chain Reactor appear to be impenetrable and unclear whether one is allowed to enter or not. And this, despite the welcoming appearance of the interior and the possibility of moving the chains aside like a curtain (as they are not fastened to the inferior beams). The passerby must thus feel the desire to enter the work in order to find the passage in. Camouflaged by the walls of chains, it is not easily spotted, but can be found by a curious and attentive visitor in the cube's north-eastern corner. This deliberate and cunning aspect of *Chain Reactor* not only forces the viewer to participate in the installation, but has the specific goal of making us aware of industrialization's effect on our lives.

Embodied in the work—its main components being chains, its principal material steel, and its surroundings business edifices—is the threat of industry. In other words, *Chain Reactor* stands for industrialization, an economic system which greatly affects the social and political aspects of our First World reality. The chains, or the chains of industry, bound our society in a chaotic life of perpetual motion, a fast-paced world of information highways and material consumption. Unlike the citizens of war-torn or economically unstable countries, members of our society do not need to fight for their survival. Our immediate concerns usually consist of earning enough money to spend on vehicles, flats, and vacations on sun-bathed beaches. But as the number of available products and information increases, most of us feel pressured into acquiring as many of them as possible. Who can say they do not feel compelled to purchase a DVD player, a flat-screen television set, a high-speed Internet connection, or the newest beauty product?

Consequently, our jobs demand more and more of our time and energy, which prevents us from fully participating in our social circles. This idea is expressed in *Chain Reactor*'s hearth and benches, a clear reference to humankind's first social gatherings around a fire. These encounters took form in their simplest and most honest fashion, not yet filtered through sound waves or satellite signals. And now, this primal need for a fire and human interaction is imprisoned within the cell of industrialization. However, the ingeniousness of the work lies in the visitor's discovery of his or her freedom to enter the sphere of the hearth. The visitor soon becomes aware that he/she is not trapped inside, and that *Chain Reactor* only seems to hold the hearth prisoner. The cube's ceiling, free of chains, affords an unobstructed view of the sky. The entrance is also more discernible, as it is no longer disguised by the walls of the installation. The visitor thus realizes that the hearth, and the closeness we all need to feel to other human beings, is not as difficult to reach as it seemed at first. All one has to do is to seek the passageway, or move the curtain of chains aside, and step into the comfortable warmth of the fireside meeting place.

While a fire was to be an integral part of the installation, the organizers of the *Biennale* were restricted in its use by the Montreal Fire Department due to the incurring risks this would entail. Ironically, the stone hearth suffered damage during the first week of the *Biennale*, the only period during which it was used. The stone is now split into pieces, as if even the symbol of society's primeval place and source of contact had been threatened. ←

MARCO CASAGRANDE AND SAMI RINTALA, *Chainreactor*, 2002. Steel, chains, stone, gravel. Photo : Guy L'Heureux. Courtesy : CIAC/Biennale of Montreal, 2002.

Maurice **LEMIEUX**

On découvrira avec intérêt le travail du sculpteur Maurice Lemieux (1931-1994) en visitant le site qui lui est consacré : www3.sympatico.ca/artbylemieux. Artiste aujourd'hui méconnu, il est l'auteur notamment de plusieurs œuvres publiques d'envergure dans plusieurs régions du pays, dont : l'église Notre-Dame-du-Saint-Esprit (Valleyfield) ; l'église Pie X (Grande-Île) ; l'école Industrielle St. Joseph (Alfred, Ontario) ; le Séminaire Saint-Jean-d'Iberville (Saint-Jean) ; l'Hôpital général de LaSalle (Montréal) ; l'Institut des Arts Appliqués (Montréal) ; le Centre récréatif de Pointe-Saint-Charles (Montréal) ; l'École Technique d'Asbestos (Asbestos) ; l'École élémentaire Champlain (Candiac) ; l'église Saint-Cyrille-de-Normandin (Cté Roberval) ; l'Édifice 2000 Peel, entrée métro Peel (Montréal) ; la station de métro de La Savane (Montréal). ←

MAURICE LEMIEUX, *Enterspace*, 1980. Sculpture acier inoxydable 18 pieds de haut (4 éléments). Canderel Ltd. (I.A.T.A). Édifice 2000 Peel, entrée station de métro Peel, Montréal.