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Reflections on the 8th International Biennale of Champ Libre 8th International Biennale of Champ Libre "The Forest and the City", Montreal. September 24 — 28, 2008

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ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

Montreal

Reflections on the 8th International Biennale of Champ Libre

8th International Biennale of Champ Libre "The Forest and the City", Montreal, September 24–28, 2008

In a recent keynote lecture entitled "A Plea for the Earthly Sciences," French anthropologist Bruno Latour argued that rather than searching for chiefly human causes for our looming ecological disaster, the disciplines of the social sciences (economics, sociology, psychology, political science, to name a few) should turn their attention to relations and connections between things and how such connections can reveal a more complex, intertwined story. Society, states Latour in his usual ironic fashion, is not just made up of human agents but also non-human things: technologies, legal machineries, apparatuses of regulations and instruments; what he almost jokingly labels 'attachments'. What would a politics of such an entangled mess of these attachments, connections and influences look like? What would constitute a study of non-human things, for example, the ozone hole lying over Australia or the Gulf Stream? What would occur if, as Latour has labeled it, the old 'modernist constitution' that sought to separate humans and non-humans through the categories of 'society' (humans) and 'nature' (non human) was to crumble?

Perhaps no less ambitious in concept, the 8th Biennale of the Montreal-based media art organization Champ Libre set its sights on establishing just the kinds of connections that Latour is craving for through the purposefully ambiguous yet, ecologically tinged theme of Forest. Under what the press release called the 'supracuratorial' watch of architect and former artistic director Cécile Martin, who has since left the organization to pursue other projects, the theme Forest sought to examine the birth of new urban ecosystems and excavate/ (or, as Latour calls it) 'explicate' the confluences of architecture, media and information

systems, socio-political practices and unstable economic realities on contemporary urban space.

Critically, one can see that the theme of Forest acts as both a metaphor for the ecologies of contemporary city space as well as a framework for the artistic projects featured as part of the Biennale's five-day festival. Martin's chosen site for the Champ Libre manifestation, the QIM (Quartier International de Montréal) aimed to typify the construction of an urban forest. Planned in the urban renewal heyday of the 1960s but only completed in 2004, in many ways, the QIM acts as the perfect demonstration of the colliding of symbolic, cultural and technological forces; an architectural grand project whose ultimate built realization was the result of a myriad of overlapping and conflicting connections, associations and interests—regulations, rules, economic and political lobbies, not to mention the intervention and habitation of the citizenry.

While admirable, Martin and Champ Libre's goal of matching teams of artists (particularly those working in new media) with architects is nothing particularly new. Such public space interactive work has become almost *de rigueur* in the festivals, conferences and initiatives that now constitute the new media art landscape, particularly in Europe and, almost as ironic considering its severe lack of public environments, the United States. Indeed, each new week brings with it a new project dealing with the public realm, from the urban screens conferences founded by curator Miriam Struppek in the early 2000s, to the work that new media arts curator Steve Dietz has initiated in California at the Zero One Festival in San Jose and with the relatively recent Northern Lights Project, which aims to "present innovative art in the public sphere, both physical and virtual, focusing on artists creatively using technology to engender



new relations between audience and artwork and more broadly between citizenry and their built environment.”

With three installations created by artist/architect teams and a series of lecture/demo/workshops held at the Monopoli architecture gallery during the Biennale, however, the artistic (read: materialized) results that Martin seemingly hoped to achieve, left much to be desired. Upon first glance at the installations, one by German digital media artist Michael Saup and the Montreal architects, Atelier Big City (Howard Davies, Anne Cormier, Randy Cohen) that was situated on the sidewalk outside of the gallery and two others (*Pneus* from Patrick Harrop, Peter Hasdell and Sha Xin Wei and *Meniscus* from Patrick Beaulieu and Philip Beesley) installed within the Monopoli Gallery, one wonders why so little work is on display, particularly given the conceptual ambitions of the project outlined on the press release and web site. Besides Saup/Atelier Big City’s project, which appeared both completed and functioning, the other installations look more like sketches or proof of concepts than actual finished works. Furthermore, Saup’s was the only project that, in material terms, actually operated as an intervention in public space while Harrop’s and Beaulieu’s were ensconced in the safe space of the gallery.

One suspects these problems are both a combination of resource and organizational snags. Of course, this might be fine if the frame of the festival was to show proof of concepts yet, the project descriptions in the publicity promise experiences that in general, failed to materialize. Harrop/Hasdell/Sha’s *Pneus*, for example, is pictured in the publicity as a tantalizing, inorganic tangle of wires and tubes emerging out of and growing over Monopoli’s glass front window façade—a shock when one is greeted with nothing even slightly resembling the visual concept. The project description also set up false expectations, mixing metaphor with material realities. “A suspended forest made of a multitude of sensors and electric generators surrounding PVC tubes...many meters high” appears in the actual site more like a jumble of half-finished models without any perceivable interaction between the object and environment and with the usual media cover-up for non-functioning technologies—this time, an obscured sound track and an unnecessarily detracting (and distracting) projection

which, while trying to light the installation from the front, ineffectively reduced the remaining volumetry of the installation to a flat, 2-D wall representation. Likewise, while not promising the seduction of interaction, *Meniscus*’ direct appropriation of the forest concept—a tree branch painted black and suspended from a rotating motor over a series of strange, badminton birdie-like objects, was equally problematic, this time due to its sheer literalness, leaving little room for either departure from the concept or sheer experience.

Despite its obscure title, Saup’s *Falling Forest = Root Log*, not only attempted to engage a public on the street without the cultural frame of reference of either architecture or art but also honestly grappled in material form with the biennale’s conceptual challenge. With a suspended, supposedly radioactive log plucked from the infamous “Red Forest” outside of the Chernobyl disaster site, lit with red LED flood lights and hung inside Atelier Big City’s mildly Constructivist-styled ‘skewed elevation’, Saup’s scrambling of the natural/cultural distinction between the artificial and the natural forest (who created this hideous Red Forest where animals adapted to intense levels of radiation spillage and where the trees did not die but glowed intense red) through a decidedly non-visible use of technology, proved to be the most successful of the biennale’s installations. Perhaps Saup/Atelier Big City’s success at fusing concept and material practice was indicative of a more critical challenge that, for the most part, remained hidden in Martin’s agenda, but could gradually be seen to surface during the festival: to confront artists accustomed to working solely with concepts with the material, organizational and logistical complexities that building in the urban milieu entails.

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Chris Salter, Ph.D., is an artist and assistant professor for computation arts at Concordia University. He has collaborated with Peter Sellars and William Forsythe and co-founded “Sponge”, whose works stretched between artistic production, theoretical reflection and scientific research. His performances, installations, research and publications have been presented at numerous venues around the world including the Venice Architecture Biennale, Ars Electronica, Exit Festival-MAC Creteil, V2-Rotterdam, Elektra Festival-Montreal, Dance Theater Workshop, Transmediale and many others.