

The Guide Project Epistemological and Pedagogical Aspects

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traversée de l'Atlantique en solitaire par des œuvres d'art, due à Pierre Bourgault et à la collaboration de Nathalie Caron, Peter Gnass et René Taillefer, et la troublante *Zone de déplacement*, de Pierre Granche qui, en d'autres temps, avait déjà dérivé au large de Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, posaient la question de la stabilité dans le temps et l'espace si chère à notre notion d'art public. Alors que //Δ//, la structure de bois et de poissons boucanés de Guy Duguay, dévorée par les mouettes, et *Root Cellar*, de Vita Plume et Tim Dolla, l'œuvre qui portait la mémoire de l'usage originel du port, et dont les graines et les légumes, contenus dans les sacs et les caisses entreposés, germaient au soleil de l'été, inscrivaient l'idée de l'éphémère et de la transformation dans l'esprit d'un public peu habitué à cette facette de la réalité artistique contemporaine.

Et voilà que dans la possibilité de cet "effet" et dans l'espoir d'autres semblables, se dessine le véritable propos de cet événement, voilà que s'avoue le glissement pressenti dans cette présentation d'art difficile à nommer. Dans les œuvres qui nous étaient montrées là, et surtout dans la façon dont elles l'étaient, les priorités étaient renversées. Aussi importants et indispensables, bien entendu, qu'aient été le savoir et la pensée des artistes dans la genèse de leurs œuvres, il leur était demandé de céder le pas, pour un premier temps, à la possibilité pour le spectateur d'investir ces dernières de ses propres savoirs et curiosités.

Et soudain s'éclaire la raison de l'extraordinaire effort consenti dans le choix, le sérieux et les particularités de la formation, et l'activité des guides présentes sur le site pour toute la durée de l'événement. Elizabeth Wood, responsable de cette initiative explique plus loin en détail, et dans ses propres mots, ce qui en a fait l'importance et l'intérêt. Disons seulement qu'en accord avec ce qui précède, le rôle imparti aux guides ne fut pas de distribuer un savoir ou d'enseigner le sens des œuvres, mais simplement, et c'est tout un programme, d'aider les spectateurs à cerner leurs propres interrogations, à partir de leur savoir et de leur expérience préalables.

Il est bon de noter que, sous cet éclairage, et pour autant qu'il s'agit bien d'art véritable, le type de hiérarchie que nous avons l'habitude d'établir entre les œuvres dans les milieux spécialisés, perd un peu ici de son importance. Le savoir, indispensable à d'autres niveaux, cède là le pas à la nécessité de générer les moyens d'une acceptation, même élémentaire, du fonctionnement de l'art d'aujourd'hui par la société qui le voit naître.

Quelques incidents ont marqué l'événement :

vandalisme (l'œuvre de Nicole Houle), vol (un des voiliers de Pierre Bourgault), mépris (déplacement de l'œuvre de Vita Plume au profit du fameux festival), confusion des valeurs (ceux que gênait l'odeur des poissons fumés de Guy Duguay n'ont jamais été dérangés de voir les enfants tourner, avec des yeux ébahis et envieux,

autour des armes de guerre exposées par l'Armée canadienne sur les pelouses proches)...

Cette liste, somme toute familière, suffirait à elle seule à justifier la tenue d'un événement comme *Eau infinité des possibles* qui, aidé du fleuve et de ses rêves, avait fait le pari de rendre complices un art et son public. ■

The Guide Project: Epistemological and Pedagogical Aspects

Elizabeth Wood

Despite the innovative work being carried out in certain museum and educational contexts, attempts to foster understanding of contemporary art have tended to draw on a traditional theory of knowledge. This means that, generally, art awareness programs are limited either to diffusing information about the work, or to providing qualitative evaluation (including art-critical assessment) of works. This draws on philosophical paradigms in which knowledge exists somehow independent of the knower. This view has tended to contribute to the fostering of a societal attitude wherein possession of knowledge is the exclusive privilege of those upon whom society has bestowed the status of authority¹.

The exhibition *Eau infinité des possibles*², held in the summer of 1994, sought to actively address an issue of ongoing concern within the contemporary art milieu, namely the belief often held by the uninitiated viewer that, quite simply, art is destined for someone else. An educational paradigm, emblematic of dialogue and exchange, was adapted and integrated into the exhibition's guide training program and, through a program of daily guided tours, applied to a highly tourist-oriented site frequented by uninitiated art viewers.

Eau infinité des possibles was organized and presented by Galerie Occurrence, a contemporary non-commercial exhibition and performance space, under the direction of Lili Michaud. The actual event took place in the old port of Montreal between June and September 1994. As pointed out by Jean Dumont in the preceding text, the sociological aspects of the event affirm its innovative role, through its curatorial/conceptual framework. Aptly formulated around the theme of Water, the project united fourteen painters and sculptors from both the English and French cultures. These included seven Montreal artists, and seven from New Brunswick. Moreover, the site itself diverged from the customary exhibition circuit: works were exhibited at a highly frequented outdoor tourist site in Old Montreal in the port of the

St. Lawrence River. By presenting gallery-intended works in an outdoor context, the exhibition also incited a reconsideration of our assumptions about where works of art can be shown, and to whom.

As a result of the colossal evolution in thought and practice in the art of this century, the ambiguous nature of contemporary art has led, on the part of the public, to a general resistance to grapple with the works. Suzi Gablik aptly identifies this in the following manner: "To the public at large, modern art has always implied a loss of craft, a fall from grace, a fraud, or a hoax. We may accept with good grace not understanding a foreign language or algebra, but in the case of art it is more likely, as confronted with a work they do not like and cannot understand, that it was done especially to insult them."³

The guide project addressed this alienation which the uninitiated viewer experiences by challenging popular assumptions and practices that would define the terms whereby an individual may interact with and appreciate contemporary art. Conceptually, the project intervened in this process at two levels: first, it delineated an intersection where three sites of investigation converge; the viewer, works of contemporary art, and educational philosophy. Second, it questioned the educational model implicit in traditional approaches which are limited to diffusing information about contemporary works of art.

The guide project, diverging from traditional models of education, was elaborated around the premise that it is neither possible nor desirable to teach the meaning of works of art. Rather, art-viewing was understood as involving the construction of knowledge, as this occurs in a spiral process, in dialogue, around questions that are of personal relevance to the viewer.⁴

The pedagogical component of the project derived from the assumption that the guides would be considered temporary teachers on site. Whereas in the classroom a long-term relationship is established, however, in this project the exchange

André Lapointe,
L'Île, 1993.
Granite bleu de
Suède, calcaire de
St-Marc, pierre
des champs/Blue
granite of Swe-
den, limestone of
St-Marc, stone.
*Eau infinie des
possibles, été /
Summer 1994.*
Photo : Normand
Rajotte.



would be limited to one hour.

The selection of the four guides was innovative in that it did not consider expertise in the area of art history as the exclusive criteria for selection. Rather, characteristics which would contribute to the learning environment itself were paramount. In this project, the focus was placed on the context, environment, and relationships involved in the learning situation, actively countering the traditional pedagogical model, and the way it has been used in the contemporary art context. Without discounting the value of specialty knowledge in an area, the guide project shifted the supremacy of content authority as the primary teacher criteria, replacing it with individual characteristics more in keeping with the educational model implemented.

The guides were chosen, thus, for their ability to reflect upon and understand their own learning process, for their communication skills and their capacity to dialogue in a manner which was neither threatened nor threatening, and finally, for their basic awareness and interest in artistic expression, the artist, and the art milieu.

A rigorous two-week guide training program was held at McGill University and on-site in the old port. Solidly grounded in contemporary pedagogical theory and philosophy, while emphasizing art content as well, the training began at the level of epistemology. The first step was to challenge the participants' awareness of what knowledge is. Theoretical texts in philosophy facilitated the process of addressing fundamental questions: How do I know? How is my own knowledge constructed? Based on what authority? Are there different kinds of knowledge?

The training program, as mentioned above, also involved preparation in terms of art content: it considered the nature of the exhibition, the artists and the works, and the way in which these can be situated in an art historical context. Following the in-depth study of the artists' dossiers, including press material, slides of artists' works, and artists' statements, the guides, together with project

porte-parole Jean Dumont, met with the artists on site to discuss their work. First-hand contact with the artists allowed the guides to explore their questions.⁵ The program, at both the theoretical and the practical levels, through the implementation of weekly team meetings, daily written journals, and visitor response forms, provided a context through which guides and viewers could undergo a challenging of awareness and assumptions, and a broadening of their familiarity with the artists, the exhibition, and contemporary art.

Responses by visitors who did follow guided tours was very positive. Nonetheless, the guides' journals and experience on the site revealed a distinct reticence on the part of many of the visitors to engage with the works at all. Many chose to by-pass the guides altogether or, when approached, were busy or had other priorities. Others expressed either unfamiliarity with or disinterest in contemporary art. When invited by the guides to visit the works, some agreed, yet even in those cases a paradox seemed to emerge. While the fact that visitors often hesitated to explore the works alone would suggest that they should then welcome the opportunity to explore them with guides (who were perceived as art authorities), this was not always the case. In effect, visitors often seemed, at least initially, even more ill-at-ease in the presence of perceived "experts". This leads us to question what factors or assumptions lead to the attitudes that individuals hold concerning their relationship to works of contemporary art and its role in their lives. How or why are these factors or assumptions reinforced or embedded through societal mechanisms such as media, school, and family? To what extent does/can the art milieu itself support or deny the uninitiated public's involvement with contemporary art? We are led to wonder about the origins of the alienation prevalent in this project and elsewhere, and the extent to which the milieu is concerned with breaking down existing barriers. Could it be, for example, that works of art exhibited on public sites are indeed accessible to viewers when they are encouraged to access works from their unique, individual per-

spective? And dare we believe that we can evolve new understandings of the nature of the facilitator in this art learning process, as well as the ways in which individuals can best be prepared to carry out this role?

Drawing on the distinction made over forty years ago by John Dewey between "education as a function of society" and "society as a function of education"⁶, this project was nourished by an awareness that education can be seen as either a harmful weapon, wielded in the reproduction of existing societal imbalances, or as a valuable tool, with which to construct a more democratic society, wherein each individual has the right to participate fully. It also drew on feminist pedagogy with its emphasis on the necessity of valuing voice and narrative as central to the learning process. The project assumed that learning was an active process that began with the individual's unique location which defined her/his point of departure. For this reason, the guides needed to be not only knowledgeable in their area but, more importantly it was believed, sensitive and respectful, if they were to avoid adapting a stance which would either reproduce existing alienation or, worse, further separate viewers from the works of art.

Eau infinie des possibles not only identified key areas of concern, but also invested commitment and effort in order to redress them. The project's outcome revealed that the approach adapted by the guides, based on a model that favoured dialogue and a sensitivity to the relationship between individuals, was successful in two ways. First, it provided the context for the design and implementation of an educational model applicable to a range of art environments. Second, and perhaps most importantly, the questions which emerged from the project serve to shed light on vital aspects of the art process and its milieu. Increased interest and effort in this area may augment our understanding of the complex ways in which many disparate factors interact to perpetuate the conditions for a society wherein art is enjoyed by relatively few. ■

NOTES :

1. Authority as accorded, for example, through academic achievement, or through visibility, as in the case of professionals who practice, teach, or publish in the area of contemporary art.
2. Water, Infinite Possibility.
3. Gablik, Suzi. (1984). *Has Modernism Failed?* New York: Thames and Hudson, p.13.
4. While space constraints prohibit elaboration here, this position can be seen to emerge from recent theoretical discussions in educational philosophy, in particular critical and feminist pedagogy.
5. Verbal and written feedback during and following the exhibition indicated that the artists, as well, benefitted from this exchange.
6. John Dewey (cited in) Giroux, Henry, "The Hope of Radical Education: A Conversation with Henry Giroux". *Journal of Education*, Volume 170, Number 2, 1988, p. 101.