

Ellen Moffat *Blow* (Radical Poetry)

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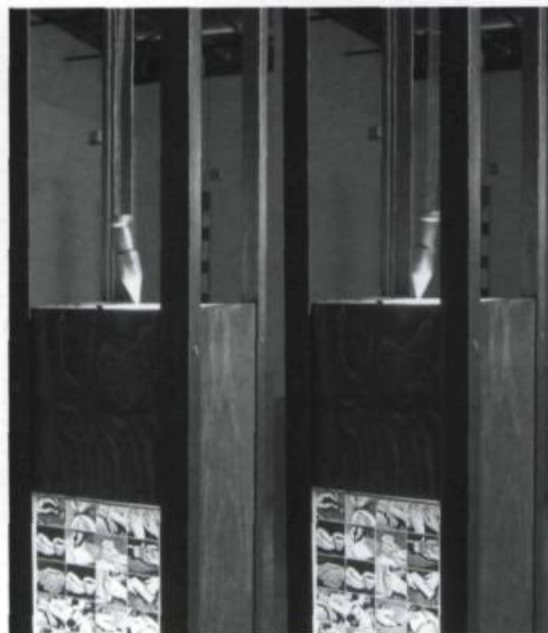
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interactifs au passage des regardeurs activent un chaos programmé, il s'avère que sous cette virtuosité contenant/contenu propre aux arts visuels, c'est la vie et moins la technicité qui sourde dans *Vertige-verticale*. Un type original de lucidité comme « état d'être dans un monde fuyant » a pris forme. Il n'a rien de l'équation ou de la conceptualisation



RÉAL PATRY et
CLAUDE RIVEST,
Vertige-verticale,
2004. Détail.
Photo : Ivan Binet.

strictement rationnelle. En effet, et c'est là que la troisième dimension, après l'espace occupé et le son ambiant, disons contextuelle, prend son importance. Elle tient à ce pari du duo de « gars » à « incruster » (ou « dégager », c'est selon) des SENTIMENTS AUX MÉCANIQUES SCULPTURALES SONORES ET VISUELLES ! J'écris cela en majuscules parce qu'il s'agit du message que Patry et Rivest ont voulu crucial bien que formaté de manière fragmentée en dix stèles.

L'observation attentive et nécessairement en finesse des sept autres dispositifs installatifs nous place devant : thématiques, images et musicalité (plus que sonorité), qui attisent des constats psychosociologiques liés aux aléas des relations interpersonnelles d'aujourd'hui. Disons des « présences d'âmes ». Par exemple, le second grand boîtier, *Entre ciel et terre*, au-delà de la transcendence, évoque ces multitudes quêtes de paix, de bonheur et d'équilibre hyper fragmentées en individualités ; *Ascenseur*, pour sa part, fantasme à la verticalité les « aller-retour » d'une modernité inachevée et qui a laissé le mythe du progrès en doute. *Monsieur* stigmatise toutes les routines et formes de confort qui camouflent la démission et l'ennui, tandis que *L'Homme cherche* cligne cinématographiquement (le célèbre décor de Méliès avec la lune qui a une fusée dans l'œil) un regard inter-

rogateur à la conquête spatiale de la lune : pourquoi donc ? Assez fabuleuse, celle-là ! Finalement, chacun à sa façon, *L'Horloge*, *Étaux portrait* et *Ordre Désordre* abordent notre quotidienneté postmoderne fomentant tantôt l'autodestruction — « se pêter la tête sur les murs » —, tantôt l'accélération des solitudes — « éviter d'entrer en contact avec les gens ».

Voilà donc un « art d'attitudes » qui fonctionne d'abord et avant tout à cause de l'incroyable minutie et l'exceptionnelle création sculpturale de chacun des boîtiers automatés, de la chimie patiente — l'œuvre s'étant construite sur plus de deux ans — entre le sculpteur et le musicien et, pour cette première, un étalement tel un boisé permettant la circulation dans l'espace flirtant avec l'installation, mais qui simultanément réhabilite le grain, le volume et la matière par ce qui lui échappe, les sons, les images et un certain regard sur la vie humaine, la psychologie des situations, notamment des rapports entre les hommes et les femmes.

Cette sensation de *Vertige-verticale*, on ne la capte pas dans une bonne forme d'ensemble mais en fragments fixes dans l'espace, la dizaine de boîtiers des mécaniques sculpturales et sonores à la verticale liant rencontres et fuites dans un même circuit. Loin de déqualifier disciplines et zones événementielles, ce métissage souligne plutôt l'importance des arts visuels comme zone franche, à la fois creuset d'une compréhension élargie de l'interdisciplinarité en art et ayant des répercussions et des influences déterminantes sur les autres genres. À fréquenter. ←

Réal Patry et Claude Rivest,
Vertige-verticale
L'Œil de Poisson, Québec
27 février – 28 mars 2004

NOTES

1. *Vertige-verticale*. Installation sonore. Une exposition de Réal Patry et Claude Rivest à l'Œil de Poisson, Québec, du 27 février au 28 mars 2004.
2. Guy Sioui Durand, « L'indiscipline : essai sur deux zones fluides de l'interdisciplinarité en art », dans *Penser l'indiscipline/Creative confusions, Recherches interdisciplinaires en art contemporain. Interdisciplinary practices in contemporary art*, sous la direction de Lynn Hughes et Marie-Josée Lafortune, Montréal, Optica, 2001, p. 53-71.
3. Guy Sioui Durand, « Quand les attitudes d'art deviennent stratégies », dans *Arts d'attitudes. Discussion, Action, Interaction*, sous la direction de Richard Martel, Québec, Inter éditeur, 2002, p. 50-57.

Ellen Moffat BLOW (Radical Poetry)

ANNIE GÉRIN

"In a desirable society which, as we are *not* in it is a future society, each of us, its members, moves through life along some path composed of steps taken in preference to many equally desired steps *not* taken. The preference is with each of us, each member. It is directed, however, not by *each* of us contemplating one desired path, but by *all* of us contemplating the contribution of every step of every member to formations of relations. A step is preferred when found, beyond being desired, to also be desirable."

HERBERT BRÜN, *MUTATIS MUTANDIS*, 1968

Composer Herbert Brün used the language of musical arrangements to explore the notion of a desirable society in which individual choice and collective action could fuse into harmony. Through steps individually and freely taken in relation to socially desirable paths, according to Brün, humans may form new types of relations and establish sustainable systems that profit the whole of society. This mode of thinking, which can be characterized as utopian, seems to be out of date and out of place in the individualistic late capitalist world we inhabit, especially after the fall of the iron curtain.

But in her latest sound/light/text installation, *Blow*, Ellen Moffat attempts to revive this notion of utopian thinking by confronting viewers with the sensuality of early twentieth-century sound poetry, spatialized and mediated through light and technology. Dadaist and Futurist poets and visual artists such as Raoul Hausmann, Hugo Ball, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Velimir Khlebnikov indeed used the modes of sound repetition, abstraction and deconstruction of language in their poetry meant to be read out loud, to provoke a change of con-

sciousness, positing, as the Structuralist later would, that we live through language and the categories it imposes. Their work was part of the utopian modernist current that believed that activating language in radical ways could change the way humans relate to each other and to the material world.

AHHH	LISTEN		
	(BREATHING)		
WHAT		DIDYOUHEAR	
(WHISPERING)			
	YOUR TONGUE TOUCH MY MOUTH TASTE OUR LIPS		
DIS	-RUPT	SI	-LENCE
TONGUES TASTE MOUTHS TOUCH MMM LIPS DIS -RUPT AAH			
	(VOCALS)		
YOU		HE	
PULSATE	POSTULATE	INTIMATE	ALTERNATE
A-	GAIN		-ST
	RACEWARSPPEEDVEINSGREASETRAILSBLOOD		
	(VOCALS) (BREATHING)		

On the gallery floor, twelve meandering root-like cables spread out from a single sound system, invading the space of the viewer. A small, raw speaker is attached to the extremity of each flex. From these twelve outlets (that refer to the range of twelve octaves audible by humans), emerges the sound poem *Blow*, a composition of breaths, phonemes, syllables and words, followed by a longer textual fragment borrowed from the work of Herbert Brün (see above). The sound travels through space emerging from one root ending at a time, forcing the viewer to bend an ear to follow the emission. It asks her to enter the network, walking over and between the cables, relating physically to the root system laid on the floor. A projection on the wall of the darkened room recreates *Blow* as concrete poetry; again, the poem is embodied by a root system or a nervous system disseminating textual fragments, words and sounds, recomposing its origin, providing new word and sound structures to shape human thought.

The extreme sensuality of the

eight-minute soundtrack, performed by Ellen Moffat and poet Steven Ross Smith, constructs for the viewer a narrative path that guides her into a specific experience. A particular spatial and temporal involvement are indeed required in following the poem, from root-ending to root-ending, to its chronological conclusion where deconstructed language reforms into Brün's utopian message. This time-based strategy is deployed as a means to re-enact the politics of engagement necessary in the building of a *desirable* society. Viewers make individual steps to discover the poem and the space it resides in. But as the looped recording guides the viewer according to a sequential path, different viewers find themselves choosing to make similar steps.

Moffat's notion of community in the context of a *desirable* society is broad and flexible. Her community is one of engaged artists, active viewers and thinkers and responsible citizens, wherever they may reside. While she expresses herself in English, she also brings in the universal language of the body in the elemental utterances of the breath and the blow. In this layering of sound, light, text and objects, language is deconstructed into primary units to allow the viewer to understand how imperfect and imprecise it is;

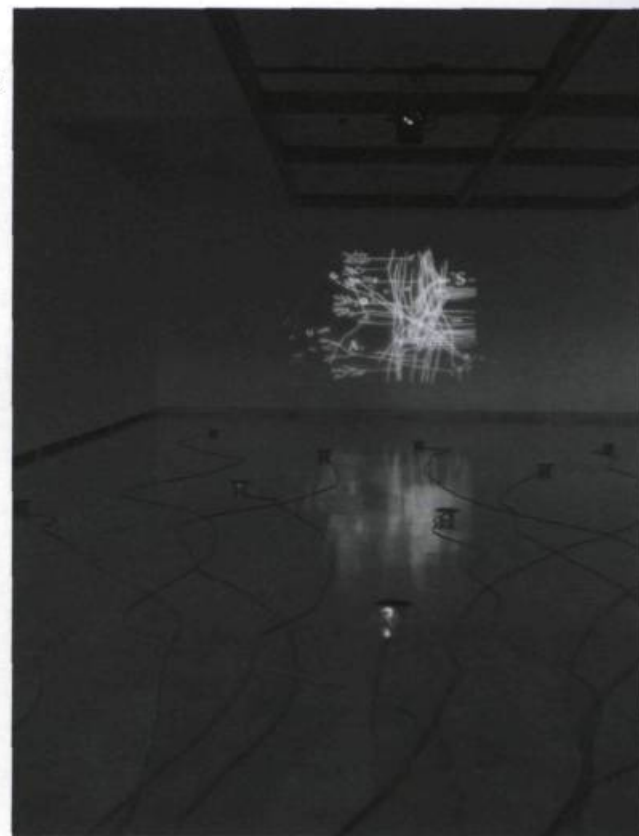
the temporary incompetence of language relocates communication. Moffat testifies: "my goal is to exceed the specificity of the local, suggesting resonances and associations rather than uniqueness." Here, both the *langue* (as a cultural/linguistic system anchoring concepts) and *parole* (with its common sounds and inconsistencies) are mediated through spatialized technology. Yet *parole* takes over from *langue* and permits the reframing of values away from established structures. In other words, the acoustic image produced for the gallery by Moffat makes the political/utopian potential of *parole* visible. Is this what could be called radical poetry?

The term *radical* most often refers to progressive politics. And there are, in fact, historical links between the avant-garde forms of early-twentieth century sound poetry and the politics of change. But the term *radical* also defines the *root*. The importance of this visual metaphor in *Blow* cannot be understated. Indeed, while the root maintains a resilient link to its point of origin, its purpose is also to always grow outwards and in various directions, seeking nutrients. In this sense, the scheme exhibited here does not represent a suggestion of return towards modernist teleological ideals. It does not imply going back in time

to invoke utopian social models based on the critique of nation states or economies that simply no longer exist. Yet, the utopian composition put on display allows the viewer to take steps meaning up the root system to the core of social ideals in order to better project outwards contemporary social desires.

This radicality is deconstructive. In *Blow*, formal modes of language are no longer contained in a single medium. They complete each other, perhaps even competing for the viewer's attention and inviting her to walk through the space, decoding, but also adding—through the language of her own body—another layer of significance. *Blow* allows a multi-sensory system for thinking utopia to take shape, as well as portraying the workings of utopian thought as a potential producer of sustainable systems.

Is it possible, or even *desirable* to revive the languages of utopia? What Moffat suggests is that bringing back utopian vocabularies to criticize the state of our current society opens up new possibilities for conceiving ideals. Allowing language to be free, that is allowing citizens to think outside



of established systems, may lead to potential steps taken towards a *desirable* society. ←

Ellen Moffat: *Blow*
The Mendel Art Gallery, Saskatoon
January 30 to March 14, 2004

ELLEN MOFFAT, *Blow*, 2004. Photo: Courtesy of The Mendel Art Gallery.

Michael Maranda CORINNA GHAZNAVI DECOY

In the gallery, two beautifully constructed harpsichords stand on their elegant legs, silent, waiting for hands to bring them to life. Suddenly, haltingly, one hears the *Aria* from the *Goldberg Variations*, played on the harpsichord but not on the ones we see. Nearing the instruments one realizes that one could not in fact play on them as they are flawed in numerous minute ways. Painstakingly constructed and beautiful, they are nonetheless dysfunctional. *Decoy*: A person or thing that lures into danger, deception, or a similar trap.

Maranda's previous work often rendered itself opaque. On 1,540 different drawings the artist wrote

the word *Aufhebung* using various different grades of pencils, three per drawing, and never in the same combination. The word was written several thousand times per page so that all one was left with was a series of works marked heavily in lead, the word itself illegible. This is at once a loss of confidence in the ideas of the Enlightenment and a laudatory striving towards resolution, however futile. *Aufhebung* refers to Hegel's "successful resolution of the didactic." The drawings were pinned so that they would flutter when the viewer passed them, underlining how fragile this resolution really is. Taken outside of the Hegelian construct, the German word also means rescinding, annulment, or reversal. To understand the piece in these complex terms the viewer must then be aware of this philo-

sophical debate, language, and history. On the other hand, since the word itself, repeated so often, is unintelligible, the work is reduced to a purely visual piece. Here, in essence, art literally obliterates didactic theory in favour of visual practice.

On the walls accompanying the harpsichords are hand-drawn music scores of the *Aria*. They stand in for the less than perfect acoustics that sound through the gallery, sufficiently representing the *Goldberg Variations*, which are familiar to most. The instruments, too, stand in for ones better executed and fully functional. Within this context these latter are unnecessary. The idea has been made visible and therefore the concept has become art: it would be redundant, even gimmicky, to create instruments that were professional

in their rendering of the utilitarian thing they were meant to be.

In an attempt to address drawing, Maranda spent months making ink by grinding and mixing paste and filling a variety of glass containers with the results. The idea was that by paring the work down to its essential materials, ink, the drawing itself was no longer necessary. Continuing with his insistence on making words images, as in the *Aufhebung* piece, Maranda made the material, the idea, the image. This concept can be seen in some of the artist's other work, like his retyping of all three Kantian critiques but omitting all but the grammatical signs, like commas, quotations, and periods. Maranda claims with a smile that he is trying to "get people to stop reading," and yet this incredibly arduous task of recording punctua-