

Michael Maranda

Decoy

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Number 69, Fall 2004

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/8978ac>

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Publisher(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (print)

1923-2551 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Ghaznavi, C. (2004). Michael Maranda: *Decoy*. *Espace Sculpture*, (69), 44–45.

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;

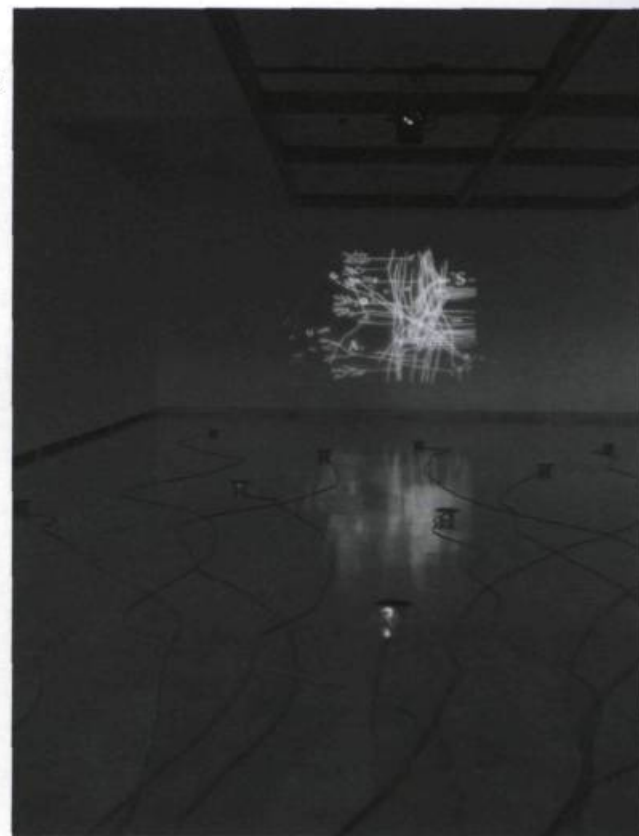
the temporary incompetence of language relocates communication. Moffat testifies: "my goal is to exceed the specificity of the local, suggesting resonances and associations rather than uniqueness." Here, both the *langue* (as a cultural/linguistic system anchoring concepts) and *parole* (with its common 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*, 2004. Photo: Courtesy of The Mendel Art Gallery.

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

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. 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-



MICHAEL MARANDA, *Decoy*, 2002. Detail. Harpsichords, headphones, ink on paper, soundtrack. Dimensions variable. Photo: courtesy of the artist.

tion marks in the precise places that they are found in the original text, and choosing quite specifically this particular text, he nonetheless claims, only to erase, the philosophy of the book. On the one hand, he renders the text as image, and on the other — where he leaves only the corrections in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* —, the futility of attempting to make sense

of the world, as philosophy strives to do.

These earlier works brought the criticism that Maranda, being an artist, was too conceptual and should, as a real artist, make objects rather than try to render concepts visible. This critique triggered the installation *Decoy*, which the artist made partly in order to demonstrate that he was indeed

not good enough with his hands to create an object that was perfect, an object that was beautiful and useful, in short, an object that was art. The flawed yet elegant instruments are the fruit of Maranda's long labour, and the accompanying music, played by the artist, further underlines his lack of manual proficiency. Poet and essayist Tim Lilburn points out that the harpsi-

chords refuse transcendence; so too, the artist aligns himself with these instruments and their inability to perform the tasks demanded of them. Lilburn references Kant's *Critique of Reason* and the claim of metaphysics that the mind lures, then betrays us. Similarly, a decoy is there to lure and then deceive. In this case, the claim is on the one hand, that an artist does not necessarily excel in making things, and, on the other, that beauty — these handcrafted instruments and music — does not always emerge, even when the correct steps are followed.

Nonetheless, I would take issue with Lilburn's claim that these instruments are "broken in spirit... shorn and weak," for they clearly stand in for something complete. Maranda's harpsichords need not be functional for they represent an idea: a striving for beauty and transcendence. The halting attempt at playing the notes that we hear are the artist's admission that he is not the artist that he was demanded to be. However, the poignancy, the futile but intense striving in his attempt to be, is quintessentially artistic. Standing before *Decoy* one is filled with an intense admiration and emotional empathy with the artist who devotes his life to trying to make sense; to continue, like Sisyphus, his way up the mountain. ←

PARUTIONS

Maurice Savoie. *Un parcours alchimique*. Catalogue publié par le centre Materia, Québec, 2004, 47 pages.

Des premières murales des années 1960 aux assemblages récents, l'exposition *Maurice Savoie. Un parcours alchimique* permet d'accéder à l'univers de l'un des plus importants céramistes québécois. Le catalogue — première monographie consacrée à Maurice Savoie, signée Lianne Nadeau, commissaire de l'exposition — fait honneur à l'œuvre de ce « créateur délinquant », pour reprendre l'expression de l'auteure. La publication — impeccable — prend en effet le relais de l'exposition par-delà la présentation éphémère des œuvres et peut être envisagée dorénavant comme une référence sur le travail de Maurice Savoie. Son œuvre est ainsi abordé dans une perspective historique doublée de récits biographiques, d'analyses des sources et des pro-

blématiques soulevées par le médium. L'étude participe ainsi à l'entreprise de reconnaissance du céramiste qui aime se qualifier de sculpteur, statut qu'il revendique comme une fantaisie, sans prétention. Et à voir son corpus d'œuvres peuplé d'animaux fabuleux composant un bestiaire de porcelaine, de bronze et de bois, on n'en doute guère. Son univers est celui de ce chien à deux têtes et à six pattes, dont les filiations remontent aux récits mythologiques. Le céramiste aime s'inspirer des descriptions extravagantes de Borges décrivant la mythologie chinoise où vit « un animal qui ne mange pas, mais qui sait danser ». D'autres pièces prennent leur source dans le monde onirique ou dans les récits de voyages, *Moby Dick* ou l'Arche de Noé. Bienvenue dans le monde de Maurice Savoie !

Celui qui a découvert la poterie dans sa jeunesse à l'occasion d'une visite d'atelier lors d'une balade

entre Sherbrooke et Montréal raconte : « Il y avait cette odeur de terre, je voulais faire ça, ne sachant pas encore ce qu'était ce métier-là. » Cette découverte le mènera plus tard à l'École du meuble de Montréal en 1954, en passant par des formations déterminantes en Italie et en France, jusqu'à l'École des beaux-arts de Montréal au début des années 1960. Depuis, Maurice Savoie a reçu plusieurs prix et maintes distinctions. Il a notamment été nommé membre de l'Ordre du Canada et de l'Académie royale des arts du Canada en 1994. En 2000, il obtenait une mention au 10^e Grand Prix des métiers d'art du Québec. Quant aux expositions, elles sont trop nombreuses pour les énumérer...

Celle présentée chez Materia, *Maurice Savoie. Un parcours alchimique*, est une exposition bilan plus qu'une rétrospective. Elle pose un regard sur les œuvres du passé, mais s'attarde davantage sur celles

des dernières années. On y trouve les documents photographiques des murales des années 1960, comme celle du pavillon du Québec à l'Exposition universelle de Montréal en 1967. On découvre aussi la murale de la chancellerie du Canada à Belgrade réalisée dans les années 1980. Puis, il y a les toutes dernières créations devant lesquelles on demeure souvent interdit. Mais qu'est-ce c'est que ces vases de faïence aux formes indéfinissables ? Et ce bateau relevant au premier abord davantage du bricolage que de la céramique ? Et ces drôles de petits chars allégoriques mêlant émaux, plastiques et autres objets trouvés ? Lianne Nadeau explique : « Maurice Savoie s'inscrit ainsi dans ce courant récent qui a légitimé non seulement le jeu en art actuel, mais également le croisement des registres, du savant au pseudo naïf. En découle une poésie libre, voire délinquante. » Ces pièces sont sans