

Reading Exercises

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**LEONARD & BINA ELLEN ART GALLERY
MONTREAL
NOVEMBER 18, 2015 –
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Marielle Macé's brilliantly titled *Façons de lire, manières d'être* (Ways to read, means to be) explores the ways in which the act of reading offers singular ways (*pistes*) of interpreting the world.¹ Upon visiting Katrie Chagnon's latest curatorial endeavour, *Reading Exercises*, it appeared to me that the curator had succeeded in presenting this concept. The exhibition proposed to examine the role of reading in society today, at a time when images and frivolous messages proliferate. It is a fitting subject matter for a university gallery such as the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, located in the same building that houses Concordia University's Webster Library where many are introduced to the world of critical thinking.

Upon reading the exhibition statement, it is clear that Max Stern curator Katrie Chagnon has thoroughly researched the theoretical grounds for this project. She explains that "by making the reading experience into a semantic operation as well as a mode of subjectification, a means of empowerment, and a vehicle for social relations, [the] artistic

experiments [included in the exhibition] contribute to the creation of 'new enunciative strategies' and the formation of new interpretative- and ultimately political – communities."² The strength of her curatorial proposal resides precisely in the variety of discourses, which successfully reiterated the potential of an intimate practice such as reading within social and political spheres.

Twelve works by eight artists and two collectives formed the corpus of the show and seemed to have been placed in the gallery with attention. Brendan Fernandes occupied a large portion of the gallery's main room. Undisturbed, two dancers performed a repetitive passionate encounter. The performers glided along a diagonal axis within a triangular space delineated by three stacks of posters. Each pile of posters contained the instructions given to the performing artists, revealing to an attentive reader the slight changes in each reiteration of the choreographed triad.

On an adjacent wall, a long strip of paper was slowly being filled up with the hundreds of thousands of words contained in the Bible, readable by the viewer using magnifying glasses provided by the gallery. By tirelessly scribbling tiny letters, Simon Bertrand contributed to the exhibition with the notion of writing – or transcribing – as a form of labour. This superb introductory display honoured the premise of the exhibition's proposition while remaining playful.

Other pieces in the exhibition bared urgent questions. The first chapter of Bouchra Khalili's video trilogy *Speeches*, entitled *Mother Tongue* alternates between five characters who recite from memory historical



Reading Exercises, 2015-2016. Partial exhibition view. Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University.
Photo: Paul Litherland. Courtesy of the artists.



texts in their native language: Moroccan Arabic, Dari, Kabyle, Malinke and Wolof — some of which have no written script.³ This project emphasizes what art critic Nick Aikens describes as “the power of the spoken word and the agency imparted on and by those who formulate and articulate their own position.”⁴ Gary Hill’s *Remarks on Color* (1994), in another instance was a fascinating journey into the developing mind of a child who is asked to read aloud Ludwig Wittgenstein’s 1951 *Remarks on Color* over a period of 45 minutes.⁵ One of the most compelling aspects of the show was *#ReadtheTRCReport*, a YouTube video project in which participants were invited to film themselves reading parts of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*.

Two of the works were lost on me. Ève K. Tremblay’s endeavour to remember Ray Bradbury’s dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) — and to subsequently forget it — was obviously fitting. However, I felt the display was not carried out to its full potential: the two large photographs pinned to the wall seemed flawed and a table displaying objects related to the performance appeared cluttered. With the exception of the video documentation of the performance, the presentation failed to engage me in the project. More problematic was Clayton Cubitt’s *Hysterical Literature*, a video piece in which female participants were filmed attempting to read pages of a book while being sexually stimulated by a vibrator (not visible on-screen). The exercise ended when the woman reached an orgasm. It is a voyeuristic spectacle of female sexuality that would have been better left out, in my opinion. To equate female orgasm with hysteria is already in itself prejudicial, and in the context of the exhibition, this work contributed little to the many interesting avenues for reflection laid out in the adjacent spaces, which made it appear all the more insipid.

Despite this, Katrie Chagnon’s curatorial thoroughness was apparent and her engagement with the theme manifested itself beyond the selection of the works. A series of collateral events further engaged the audience with the implications of the act of reading. No Reading After The Internet readings, gatherings where guests are invited to read selected texts aloud, were performed. Chagnon also judiciously chose to conclude the exhibition by hosting a Reading Marathon, furthering the French version of *#ReadtheTRCReport* project. Earlier that week, Erica Violet Lee, Joseph Murdoch-Flowers and Zoe Todd,

the three originators of *#ReadtheTRCReport* and Amy Kazymierchyk, Alexander Muir and cheyanne turions, the three minds behind No Reading After The Internet, led a talk at Artexte, which provided an opportunity to discuss reading as a methodology.

Reading Exercises avoided moralizing or being redundant, and explored various avenues that overall succeeded at exposing the crucial ways in which reading continues to possess strong social, political and poetic potential despite the prevalence of new information technologies. Both in the selection of the works and in the various events that took place, it was a project that demanded intellectual commitment from the audience that is rarely found in most current cultural endeavours. In fact, the exhibition in itself was a reading exercise that provided as much as one invested in it.

1. Marielle Macé, *Façon de lire, manières d'être*, (Paris: Édition Gallimard, 2011).
2. Katrie Chagnon, *Reading Exercises*, exhibition statement Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Concordia University (2015): 10. Available online: http://ellengallery.concordia.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/LBEAG_Exercicesdelecture_ENG.pdf
3. Nick Aikens, “Bouchra Khalili’s *The Speeches Series*: A Reflection from Europe,” *Afterall*, accessed online http://www.afterall.org/online/bouchra-khalili_the-speeches-series-a-reflection-from-europe/
4. Ibid.
5. Gary Hill’s *Remarks on Color* was also part of an exhibition entitled *De l’écriture* presented in 2007 at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal (MACM). It has since been acquired for the MACM’s permanent collection.

Anaïs Castro is an art critic and a curator. She holds a Master’s Degree in Modern and Contemporary Art: History, Curating, and Criticism from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art History from Concordia University. Her texts have been published in various magazine such as *esse arts + opinions*, *ESPACE art actuel* and *Line Magazine*. She has been working as the Assistant Director at Art Mûr since January 2013.