ETC

Joey Morgan: "Being on the Tail of the Unsettled"

Manon Blanchette

Numéro 52, décembre 2000, janvier–février 2001

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce document
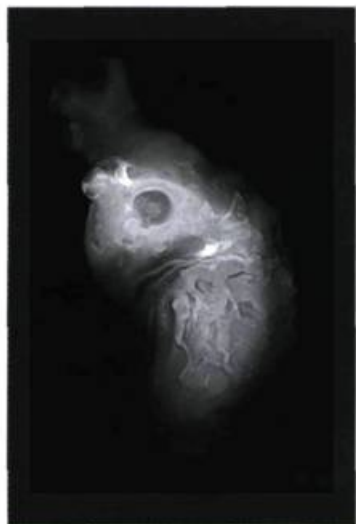
INTERVIEW

Putney, Vermont

JOEY MORGAN : "BEING ON THE TAIL OF THE UNSETTLED"

We first began to see her work frequently in Vancouver, where she was living in the 1980s. Multidisciplinary artist Joey Morgan has since pre- sented her installations in the United States – at Printed Matter in New York, among other places – in Denmark and in Canada, at major museums in Saskatchewan, Alberta and Québec.

In Putney, Vermont, where she has lived for some years now, she is working on a new piece, *an Analysis of the Romantic Condition*, for the opening of The Ever Normal Granary, Walpole in New Hampshire in 2001. Here, in Montréal, she has entered into discussions for a new *in situ* work to be produced at Quartier Éphémère.

In an ever-changing creative context, and prompted by the growth of the new technologies, I wondered about the way Joey Morgan's work was evolving. In other words, how was she incorporating this new virtual reality into her aesthetic world which, for its part, had always made a great deal of room for fiction through narration. I was also very interested in knowing how her creative process might be influenced by the computer, that new tool which is currently generating all kinds of manipulations of the image. Joey Morgan had always been concerned with maintaining a poetic, sensual dimension in all the materials she used.

Finally, the Web as a space for creation is becoming increasingly established, despite the resistance of a milieu that has difficulty forging a new critical discourse in response to a material whose origins are not always known. We have not yet finished writing the history of "installation" as an art form, and already that of cyber art is emerging.

In the face of this artistic tumult, how do viewers actually experience the work? How can they give meaning to this multiplicity of artistic forms?

Manon Blanchette : *Your pieces have sound, image,*
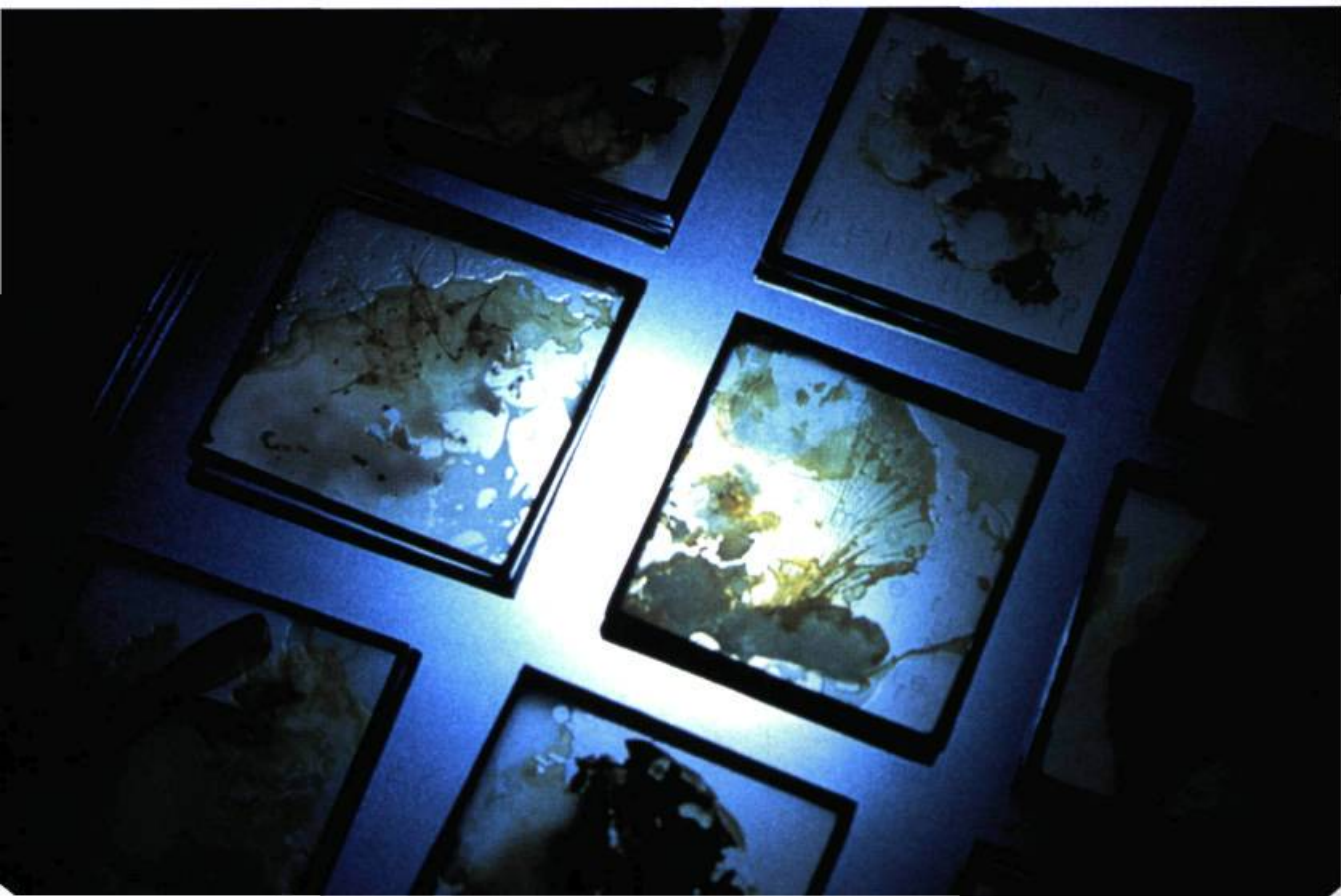
object, to name but a few elements – here is a lot of information coming from different media, different sources at the same time. What do you expect from visitors, in terms of the way they take this information ?

Joey Morgan : Well, it depends. If the piece is in a non-gallery situation, a lot of times it becomes part of the visitors' own territory, so they have as much claim over the space as I have, or the work has. And then when the piece is no longer there, it's like something has happened – a shared experience happens. That also happens in a different way in a gallery, but I think sometimes there's a certain expectation as you go to a gallery; it can work with the piece very much. And there's a certain sort of dailiness of your own life. If it's in a different kind of environment, it means that you've already put a certain investment into getting to this piece, seeing the piece. I know when I did *Fugue*[1], people would come and listen to the whole piece for 45 minutes. They were in this leaking warehouse, listening and listening. Sometimes in a gallery situation, you go, you get the idea, you leave. I think the public makes a different kind of investment when it is going into its own space.

M. B. : *I'm very much interested in your process of making art. How do you work and how do you know when it's finished ?*

J. M. : The piece starts on the tail of the previous piece. Usually, I work on a question that has been the basis of one piece, then either it has an extension, or I turn the question around in a completely different way. Sometimes, it's (sort of) to take the question and come at it a completely different way.

M. B. : *So you just put things together, like a sculptor ?*

J. M. : It feels like drawing more than sculpting, in a way. The way I draw is to build up the layers of the surface, and to tear the surface down at the same time.

M. B. : *So the layers would be the sound and the video image, the objects ?*

J. M. : Those are layers, and the layers of the sound upon the sound upon the sound, and how they come through. It's not just piling on top of each other. It has to be a weave that goes between them.

M. B. : *How would you describe the space the people are coming to, in your installation work ? Would you think of that space as a theatre ?*

J. M. : In some pieces it is. In *nO fiXeD AddrESs*[2], I wanted to get away from the physical space completely. It was just electronic, so that the theatrical space came within the viewers' own space, own world.

They structured the time and how they saw it. In some other contexts, it might be that they only see it out of the corner of their eye. It isn't necessarily like a theatrical performance that they sit through and they listen through. It could just be a glance. In other ones, it's much more like a theatrical performance. It had stories that went through and built it up. It didn't matter when you entered into the stories, but it was like a circular kind of a theatrical thing.

M. B. : *I see you have integrated the computer as a tool in your work. How did it change your aesthetic, your way of working or your way of thinking ?*

J. M. : I started using the computer for sound editing. Gradually I started to use it in terms of the images. It was just a drawing tool. In one piece, *Fugue*, I used it because it had to answer a theoretical question I had which was : How did something exist in two places at the same time ? – and the only answer I could come up with was sound.

What happens with working the images on computer is that it's very fluid. It's very much like painting. It feels like a very plastic manipulation of the image. And it brings up a lot of questions in terms of what that means. It brings up all the same issues of representation, interpretation, and where the lines are between these.

M. B. : *And you don't feel limited by the tool which is the computer ?*

J. M. : No. For me, computer is a transitional medium.

M. B. : *Can you talk about the sound in your installation work ?*

J. M. : Well, I think the sound is very much the same question about the context, the physical context, and it's subversive in a way, because it isn't immediately apparent. And I think that it's also supposed to be transitional, in that I think we have these layers of sounds in our own heads all the time. Right now, I'm sort of half listening out there, and I might be hearing something on the street, and they're all kind of mirroring together in my perception, so it's externalizing that situation, for the piece, because so many of the pieces have to do with psychological matters. But the transition, I think, between that external sound and your own sound within your head can become quite diffuse. And before you analyse it, it goes right into your brain.

M. B. : *So when you use sound, you are thinking of the way the people will react to that sound? You want to create an effect on them? Or is it more like an element of the piece ?*

J. M. : It really depends on the work. Sometimes it's a seduction into the piece, it's almost like a thread that comes in and hooks in. Sometimes it's of the material itself, sometimes it's a projection onto the material, sometimes it's several parts going on all at the same time. It's the viewer, the visitor, that completes the piece.

And it is the same way with the projections. It's the viewer that completes the understanding of all the visual elements together.

M. B. : *I would like you to talk about poetry. We said*

Joey Morgan, *The man who waits and sleeps while I dream*, (detail).

earlier that the writing can be seen as being poetry, but also the whole piece can be seen as a poem, can it not ?

J. M. : The poetry is between the words. It's the sound, it's the connection between them, it's elusive in that sense, I think. Although it's real, I think that with these, the elements all contribute to an understanding of what's between the elements. And sometimes it's uncomfortable to have this position between them, in the same way that in a poem, sometimes the words shouldn't be together or don't belong together. But there's another sense that comes out of them being next to each other, and so it's the same in the installation pieces. Because objects, or this object and this sound, don't belong together, but when you put them together, there's another – there's a larger meaning that sort of evolves from that, and a lot of that has to do with the person who's receiving it, and that person's own projections in the mix.

M. B. : *Do you deliberately make an art which is not clear in order to be poetry ?*

J. M. : I don't think it's deliberately not clear. I think it's deliberately open-ended, so that there's a place for the viewers to claim the material as their own.

M. B. : *Do you think you would be interested in working on the Net, like doing a Web site ? do you think that this space, this new space of technology, can be of some interest for you ?*

J. M. : To approach the Internet on its own it would have to come from the material itself, in the same way as when I did *nO fiXeD AddrESs*, it wasn't that I wanted to work with answering machines or even that I wanted to work with sound. There are certain things about the Internet that are, you know, intriguing, that would be a way of solving a problem sometime, but it's not that I'm drawn to make a piece for the Internet.

M. B. : *Do you think that space can be poetical ?*

J. M. : I think it is. I think with a new thing like the Internet, and in so much technology, it's really a ground for projections. I mean, it has so much to do with what you layer on it. I mean there's so much space for the people that are receiving it or giving it to put their own space on top…

M. B. : *By manipulating ?*

J. M. : Not even, just psychological projection on top of the material.

It's a public space and a very private space at the same time. That's an interesting side-effect.

<div align="right">INTERVIEW BY MANON BLANCHETTE</div>

NOTES

[1] *Fugue*, (1984), Sculptural installation, with three related soundtracks. The *Fugue* project established a correspondence between two sites. As one of a row of houses was demolished the sound was transferred live to the installation site, a derelict warehouse half a mile away. Later the sound of the house demolition was incorporated into two other sound layers in concert : a piano being slowly pried apart and a series of piano exercises. This arrangement was presented as 45 minute recitals.

Originally realised in a derelict warehouse on Hamilton Street in Vancouver, the piece was re-configured and shown in several public galleries in Canada and is now in the permanent collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

[2] *nO fiXeD aDdrESs* , 1987-1993. The installation was composed of a series of telephone answering machine messages (4 messages @ 3 minutes), advertised by commercially distributed matchbooks and by broadcast TV commercials.

The work is installed in a "backroom" to the side of the gallery exhibitions. Peering in through a glass door one can see a group of makeshift tables holding rows of answering machines. Lights on the machines blink in response to incoming calls. The heart of the piece unfolds through a series of telephone messages.

The audience is informed of the piece by the installation in the gallery, broadcast television commercials, or by a series of matchbooks distributed throughout the city.

Once the call is made, the piece is transferred from the public to the private domain, continuing as a disjointed monologue through four recorded messages. During the final call the piece breaks into multi tracks, piling one on top of the other, and the caller can leave a message of his own.

The piece was first installed at Mercer Union, Toronto. It was later re-configured for installations at CIAC, Montréal; the Sydney Biennale, and the Contemporary Art Gallery in Vancouver.