

How Can We Still Believe in Art or Look Forward?

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How Can We Still Believe in Art

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The result of collaboration between several galleries, contemporary art centres and museums, the new BNLMTL 2014 invites us to start *looking forward*. Why? So as to pause and take a critical view of things. How? Through works that offer ingenious strategic mechanisms and variously affect us according to the type of experience offered.

It is understood that art is warning us against our conduct, thus calling for profound change in the harmful habits directly responsible for irrevocable worldwide unrest. Consider, for example, industrial exploitation, which disregards the environment it destroys both near and far from the exploitation sites. In *Deep Weather* (2013), Ursula Biemann provides irrefutable proof by capturing the scepticism of the Bangladeshi workers building an embankment of sandbags, a pitiful material before the force of the looming flood. All those even remotely interested in Canadian politics will be affected by these images, which juxtapose the methods used by Bangladeshi workers with the means implemented to extract Alberta's oil. In *looking forward*, several other artists also reveal, each in their own manner, the indifferent actions of most inhabitants on the planet.

Given that the message is not new and has been reiterated by Hubert Reeves and other scientists for decades without much effect, what makes us now believe that art will finally compel us to hear and

heed the call? What is the real practical power of contemporary art, when countless museums around the world have recognized their failure to change human behaviour despite eminent catastrophe?

Some artists, like Ursula Biemann, try to raise awareness. Their determination suggests that hope is still possible. Employing more or less successful strategies, the Biennale artists seek to make us join their social project. *Looking forward* thus elicits a moralizing, though necessary, discourse.

Horror at Your Fingertips

Several works succeed in marking our memories and perhaps cracking the wall of indifference. *Touching Reality* (2012), by Thomas Hirschhorn, is the most convincing. Horror is the work's key mechanism. Yet, for various reasons, its horror meets the "sublime," possibly providing impetus for reflection, which is the first step in taking a critical view loaded with potential. One reason is the dimensions of the image, which help to captivate us completely. Another is the diagonal placement of the bodies, which directs our gaze towards the scene's interior, turning us into virtual actors or, at the very least, voyeurs. Lastly, the colour harmony, reminiscent of certain paintings by Caravaggio, enthralls and makes us feel culpable. In other words, the video work captures the viewer's gaze through its emanating light. Viewers are bid to notice what there is "to see" and, drawn by the audacity of what is being represented, suppress their momentary guilt. Yet the paradox of the work is precisely to show horrors via a support that renders the image beautiful. Thanks to the interplay between videography and photography, the boundary between the beauty of the representation and the horror of the subject rep-

resented by the image is blurred. In short, one could say that this work portraying "horror" is "sublime." Why? Because the horror and the sublime produce an effective feeling, namely fear. An existential fear, a fear of death. A feeling similar to one we sometimes experience before great tragic operas. Maurizio Cattelan has said: "I'm not really interested in beauty for its own sake. But it can be used as a means to create something truly disturbing."¹

This is exactly what Hirschhorn does through video, an excellent medium for superimposing layers of images. Here, a second universe is depicted, namely the tablet, a mobile digital device on which photographs of corpses proliferate. Through the emanating light and the oscillation between surfaces, the video and the digital tablet create a visual blur that fascinates, attracts and captivates viewers without their truly realizing it. The horror, raised to the level of the sublime, arouses a fear of death as viewers face others' mortality, as well as their own fate. Moreover, those with the courage to watch experience genuine discomfort when they realize that the images are being navigated, zoomed in, scrolled forwards and backwards by the touch of an anonymous hand on the tablet. We then wonder who is navigating these images without apparent concern for their horrific nature, whose action suggests mere fascination. In order to stir up debate and challenge the individual as part of society, Hirschhorn evokes the power of the media and its objective indifference with regard to what it depicts. He critiques not only the media presenting images of horrors, but also those who consume them. *Touching Reality* thus wants to be the theatre of this consumption, with the viewer as its symbolic actor, frightened and culpable. Here the symbolism seems vital, since it fuses the representation of scrolling through images with the banal but real gesture that everyone does daily. The visitors' virtual participation directly implicates them in the act and thus makes them complicit.

The Fatal Sublime

Other works also engage strategies relating to "beauty." Shirin Neshat's *Illusions and Mirrors*,

shown at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, is a sublime and mysterious film whose structure works with the paradigm of opposition.

A classically beautiful woman wanders in a landscape that is nebulous because reduced to a black and white image. As the highly successful actress of the film *Black Swan*, Natalie Portman belongs to the public sphere of the film industry. However, a contemporary artwork exists in a different context. Even if the artwork could attract a large audience, the paradigms nevertheless change. Essentially, those who watch Shirin Neshat's film should expect an experience outside of popular cinema. In contemporary art, concern for the audience, for their physical and intellectual comfort, is not a given. When a video work or a film is presented as an installation, those watching must be open to exploring the space and entering the unknown. In her book *Le paradigme de l'art contemporain*, Nathalie Heinich writes that visitors must often part a heavy curtain and venture into the dark, at the risk of knocking into someone or not finding a seat to watch the work, without knowing its exact duration or how far it has progressed.²

To give us a sense of Shirin Neshat's new work, the press release mentions that the presentation of *Rapture* at the 1999 Venice Biennale was a resounding success for the artist. "The linked issues of the status and representation of women in Muslim countries have always been at the heart of the artist's concerns. With her recent twelve-minute short film [...] a young woman wandering on a beach in search of a ghostly presence makes a staggering discovery."³

Just as with Hirschhorn's work, the images are very beautiful. In a classical style, they represent the almost clichéd vista of the sea. Yet beyond the represented subject, the question of "how" is most relevant here. Since viewers are asked to experience some of the protagonist's inner life through images that are often imprecise and evanescent, they feel a sense of security and well-being. As though inviting visitors to participate, the beautiful, grainy images compel them, however, to be patient, lulled by their subdued ambience. Shirin Neshat uses a technique similar to one of Bill Viola's.⁴ We know that the fact of waiting for an event to occur makes the individual who is waiting vulnerable. In *Illusions and Mirrors*, beauty and, I would add, the sublime are used as invitations to go on a journey. This is a voyage into solitude and, above all, an introspective descent that leads travellers to a shocking encounter. Taken or even wrenched out of the comfort created by the dreamlike images, viewers are startled and left to question the sense of this horrific vision. Was it real or imagined? What did I see exactly? I believe it is less important to identify what is observed than it is to examine the *mise-en-abîme* mechanism that

viewers encounter. Poetical in nature, the film thus gives viewers much room for interpretation. We all accompany the woman as we watch her wander from room to room in a large bourgeois house or on the beach. And when the protagonist sees herself projected into a horrific future as a result of the ravages of time, we stand before universal mortality. The terrible discovery is momentous and effective. It enables the awakening of human consciousness. It reminds us that our time is brief and that of our planet even more so, therefore we need to protect it beyond our sole existence.

Evanesence as Force of Repulsion

Some artists, such as Isabelle Hayeur and Klara Hobza, also use the evanescent image or the out-of-focus technique to render their work effective. Isabelle Hayeur has been presenting us with a dual view of the world for a long time: the one we see without too much effort and the one we discover buried underwater or underground. This second reality reveals the lax attitude of citizens and society. Whether a matter of polluting industries or irresponsible individuals, the consequence of contaminants is the creation of immense foul and viscous dumping grounds: our rivers and subsoil. By judiciously opposing images, Isabelle Hayeur reveals, as long as our eyes linger, a mysterious but very real world: industrial and domestic pollution. In order to break through the widespread societal indifference and ease, the artist has chosen the evanescence of the imagination as the slow mechanism of identification. Here too, the moment of discovery is essential and strategic. At first fascinated by the outside landscape, we only grasp the horror of the invisible after some time has passed. Yet the fact of simultaneously grasping two paradoxical iconographic poles causes a confusion that creates a memory trace. When the work is examined over a period of time, observers engage in an unconscious process of identification. They seek to "become," to be reassured by the meaning of the images. Yet the gradual discovery of what this indistinct world conceals prompts visitors to recognize their own culpability. The indistinctness *that doesn't tell all* leaves room for interpretation for the one looking at *Bayou Terrebonne 01 and 02*.

Klara Hobza uses a similar technique in her installation *Diving Through Europe* (2010–), which includes videos in small and large formats. In this impressive underwater voyage, the evanescence of

the rendering proposes a murky unknown for humanity. Citizens here or elsewhere can see almost nothing edifying in the pervasive dull blue-green water. Given the extensiveness of the terrain covered, no one can recuse themselves from the debate. Those who look on find they are looking at themselves as the actors of the past and possibly the future. With a kind of universal symbolism that transcends cultural identity, Hobza cedes her position to us and challenges us. We are in her work to such an extent that it seems impossible to see anything other than our own actions, our own responsibility. Present, responsible, culpable: this is the message the exhibition conveys to all citizens.

Manon Blanchette PhD

Translation: Oana Avasilichioaei

An art historian and arts administrator, **Manon Blanchette** is the Chief Operating Officer of Pointe-à-Callière, the Montréal Museum of Archaeology and History. She previously held several positions at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, including Chief Curator and Director of Communications and Marketing. She also served as Director and Acting Curator of Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff, Alberta, and as a Cultural Advisor at the Canadian Embassy in Paris, where she headed the Canadian Cultural Centre. An expert in Bill Viola's art, she has written many works and articles on contemporary art. Manon Blanchette holds a D.E.A. (Paris, 1984) and a PhD in arts studies and practices (UQAM, 2003), and has received the titles of Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres (France, 1992) and Woman of Distinction (Board of Trade of Metropolitan Montreal, 1997). In 2012, she was awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal. Having chaired and sat on numerous boards, she is currently on the boards of the Conseil des arts de Montréal and ETC MEDIA.

1 Heinich, Nathalie. *Le paradigme de l'art contemporain*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2014. 160. (Our translation.)

2 *Ibid.* 160.

3 Neshat, Shirin. "Illusions & Mirrors." The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/expositions/a-laffiche/shirin-neshat/>. 2014. Web. 17 December 2014.

4 Blanchette, Manon. "Vers une pragmatique de l'ébranlement dans les œuvres de Bill Viola." Diss. Université du Québec à Montréal, 2003.



Isabelle Hayeur, *Bayou Terrebonne 02*, 2013. Photograph; 102 x 213 x 5 cm.
Courtesy of the artist, Division Gallery (Montreal, Toronto) and BNUMTL 2014.