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MICHAEL A. ROBINSON, BLACK PERIOD

Struck by the upsurge of international art fairs and the global art market in recent years, Michael A. Robinson has created the exhibition *Black Period*. Shown in the Main Gallery of l'Œil de Poisson,¹ the installation combines three sculptural assemblages made of various materials: tripods, cameras, video cameras, electrical wires, velvet, and flags. In contrast to his previous work, which has been characteristically white, here Robinson uses a monochromatic black to express the dark thoughts plaguing his mind as a result of the art market's explosive growth. For over twenty-five years, he has based the subject matter of his works on the very fact of being an artist, all the while fostering lasting relationships within the art milieu. *Black Period* is therefore not the expression of a malaise the artist feels relative to his professional context; rather, it questions the power of the global art market, which remains out of reach for most artists. Robinson constructed his recent exhibition based on this fundamental question: "Does the global art market encroach on the values and profound artistic aspirations of creators?"² The globalization of the art world makes some artists feel they do not fit the designations used by institutions. This situation conceals a deeper affect that melds questions of artistic integrity with those of economic advancement, commerce, and the global market. Through *Black Period*, the artist reveals his observations, ideas, and desires, and this dialogue continues in front of the works installed in the space.

When visitors enter the Main Gallery, they are first struck by the monumental presence of a sculpture called *Subject to scrutiny*. Cameras and video cameras converge in the centre of the work, forming a dense nucleus from which the shutter's amplified sounds emerge and lights flash in every direction. Stripped of their usual use, the cameras face away from viewers to point at each other. Standing before *Subject to scrutiny*, we understand that the work's only subject is its introspective form, its own inner life. It is thus impossible to separate the concept from the form, the materials from the proposal, the artist from his work. Around the cameras, dozens of tripods shoot outward like rays, underscoring Robinson's evident interest in the line and the elementary unit of *dessin* [drawing], which can be freely transposed into the semantic realm as "*dessein* [design]"³ or even, in the context of *Black Period*, as an artistic "intention."⁴ Through its vocabulary that combines formalism and conceptualism, *Subject to scrutiny* invites us to merge with the work to experience its reflexive and ontological nature.

Starting from this state of reflexive awareness, Robinson infuses the works of his exhibition with various references drawn from philosophy, aesthetics, and his own impressions. Nearby, a monolithic sculpture titled *Black Period*, built out of wood and painted a matte monochromatic black, stands on the gallery floor. The object is a scale model of a contemporary art fair set up with a dozen stalls. In approaching the sculpture, viewers can almost make out the miniature works glued to the walls of the model and their fictional exhibition space: "Who are the actors, the artists who operate in this global art market?"⁵ While the market has

exponentially grown in the last several decades, *Black Period* reminds us that this commercial increase is beyond the scope of most artists' reality. Robinson uses the black monochrome to emphasize this confusing feeling of distance, without evoking any particular form of exclusion. In her book *Forgetting the Art World*, Pamela M. Lee evokes a similar affect: "We need to force the question of our own embeddedness in this world: how to confront the relation between globalization and contemporary art when we are both object of, and agent for, such processes."⁶ *Black Period* follows directly from its creator's concerns by questioning the very nature of creative expression and the artist's responsibility.

At the back of the Main Gallery, *Hoist that rag* is an assemblage of tripods forming a three-dimensional circular mosaic. Using the centre of the sculpture as a fulcrum, the poles trace a web of lines pointing outwards. Diaphanous black flags hang from their tips, bearing the logos of international contemporary art fairs, such as Art Revolution (Taipei), PULSE (Los Angeles), and FIAC (Paris). Through its form and content, *Hoist that rag* displays a virtual cartography of the art world's commercial excesses in the exhibition space. Seeing a succession of names of international art fairs not only produces an aesthetic experience but also makes us aware that the massive transformation of the market radically changes art into a vehicle for financial speculation.

Given their suggestive power, the artifacts forming them, and their varied ways of occupying the space, the works of *Black Period* suggest an absence of unequivocal meaning. Their formal diversity evokes the artist's conceptual nomadism. Furthermore, they concretize the tension inherent in any attempt to represent the art world, to reveal the layers of iconography so as to re-imagine it as an organic network of reflexive experiences. In this context, *Black Period* impacts the realm of the senses, of percepts and affects, all the while offering a vision of the production of ethical values, references, and the potential sources of creativity.

Cynthia Fecteau

Translated by Oana Avasilichioaei

Cynthia Fecteau received a Master of Visual Arts from Université Laval. Interested in certain forms of understanding in contemporary art and philosophy, such as the creative experience, deep ecology, and ecosophy, she has published articles in *Espace, art actuel, Zone Occupée*, and *Le Sabord*. In 2015, she pursued her writing and research at an art residency in Saint-Mathieu-de-Trévières, France.

1 Main Gallery of l'Œil de Poisson, Quebec City, May 8 – June 7, 2015.

2 Michael A. Robinson, interview with author (June 9, 2015).

3 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le Plaisir au dessin* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2009), 19.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Michael A. Robinson, interview with author (August 21, 2015).

6 Pamela M. Lee, *Forgetting the Art World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 17.