Espace Art actuel

Claudio Rivera-Seguel : Tracking a Nomad
Curtis Joseph Collins

Art public
Numéro 49, automne 1999

URI : id.erudit.org/iderudit/9674ac

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)
Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN  0821-9222 (imprimé)
1923-2551 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Espace Art actuel, (49), 37–39.

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d’auteur. L'utilisation des services d’Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d’utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne. [https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/]

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.
Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l’Université de Montréal, l’Université Laval et l’Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche. www.erudit.org
Air consists of a delicately balanced wood horn two metres in length. To blow a horn, one must inhale, then exhale energetically through pursed lips. The presence of such an instrument here recalls the unconscious act we perform hundreds of times a day to draw life-giving oxygen into our bodies. While an environmental subtext runs through the exhibition, it is especially evident in Air. Soil and water pollution are undoubtedly serious problems. But watching the horn sway gently back and forth in the gallery while standing there breathing makes one aware of our fragile dependence on clean air. As an ancient means of communication, the horn is also suggestive of social awareness of our fragile dependence. The presence of such an instrument here recalls the unconscious act we perform hundreds of times a day to draw life-giving oxygen into our bodies. While an environmental subtext runs through the exhibition, it is especially evident in Air. Soil and water pollution are undoubtedly serious problems. But watching the horn sway gently back and forth in the gallery while standing there breathing makes one aware of our fragile dependence on clean air. As an ancient means of communication, the horn is also suggestive of social awareness of our fragile dependence. The young Rivera-Seguel attended elementary and secondary school in Vancouver, followed by two years of study in urban planning and economic geography at the University of British Columbia. In 1985 his family returned to Santiago where he enrolled in the architecture program at the University of Chile. During his undergraduate studies the artist was involved in a student revolt or “toma” (Spanish colloquial term for “occupation”), and was expelled by university officials pending review. However, following his re-admittance to the school, he was politically persecuted and decided to quit in protest. In 1988 Rivera-Seguel moved back to Vancouver and entered the Bachelor of Architecture program at the University of British Columbia, where he graduated in 1992. This nomadic artist's career over the past ten years is marked by a variety of productions spread across three continents, including works created for specific locations in Santiago, Vancouver, New York, Montreal, and Paris. One of his earliest public actions, for wood panels to support three of the columns on the carpeted floor (the fourth column had an extended base, and was thus able to stand on its own).

While Larson grounds Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Wood in her own personal experience, through her use of universally familiar materials and symbols, she manages to speak to every viewer regardless of their gender, ethnicity or age. This transcendence is magnified by the freedom granted us to touch her finely crafted objects. Through the trust she shows in us to handle her work with the care it deserves, she enhances the sense of intimacy, protection and preservation embodied in her installation.

Doris Wall Larson, Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Wood Rosemont Art Gallery, Regina Feb. 3-Mar. 5, 1999

The art of Claudio Rivera-Seguel is always transient, and thus reflects its creator's continual movements through metropolitan centers across North America, Europe and South America. Using urban refuse Rivera-Seguel transforms and produces spaces, often within an architectural sense, that contest mainstream standards of cultural significance. His installations as well as public actions executed during the final decade of this century, are based on a multinational language of altered symbols which are ultimately parodies of Western belief systems. The LUZ=LUZ simultaneous international public installations in Frederick (Canada), Paris (France), and Santiago (Chile), during 1999 and 2000, represent his most ambitious series of interrelated ephemeral creations to date...

Claudio Rivera-Seguel was born in 1965 in Prince Rupert, British Columbia, and at the age of two was relocated to Concepción in southern Chile. His family moved from this small city to Santiago, the nation's capital, when he was an adolescent. In 1973, during General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte's military coup over the socialist Chilean government of Salvador Allende, the artist's father, Claudio Eduardo Rivera-Villalobos was incarcerated as a political prisoner. After eighteen months of being moved from one concentration camp to another, Rivera-Villalobos gained exile for his family to Canada.

The young Rivera-Seguel attended elementary and secondary school in Vancouver, followed by two years of study in urban planning and economic geography at the University of British Columbia. In 1985 his family returned to Santiago where he enrolled in the architecture program at the University of Chile. During his undergraduate studies the artist was involved in a student revolt or “toma” (Spanish colloquial term for “occupation”), and was expelled by university officials pending review. However, following his re-admittance to the school, he was politically persecuted and decided to quit in protest. In 1988 Rivera-Seguel moved back to Vancouver and entered the Bachelor of Architecture program at the University of British Columbia, where he graduated in 1992. This nomadic artist's career over the past ten years is marked by a variety of productions spread across three continents, including works created for specific locations in Santiago, Vancouver, New York, Montreal, and Paris. One of his earliest public actions,
enjoyed these images from a local dumper following a world-wide advertising blitz celebrating the fam­

ous American doll's 50th anni­

versary. Also in one corner of Rivera-Seguel's paradise was a collection of shopping carts stacked on top of each other, in an idealistic space symbolic of how American consumer values have come to dominate Western cultures in the latter half of this century. Has the supposed euphoria of gaining material wealth finally replaced the spiritual salvation offered by Christianity as the ultimate goal of life? Such ques­

tions are central to LUZ=LUZ, as evident in the slogans that will appear on an electronic advertising board in Fredericton, which in­

clude: Rejoice the overwhelming emptiness of your converted soul.

Through the deployment of urban space as an Rivera-Seguel's creations have failed to enter the process of commodification, which is critical to the existence of art dealers, institutions, collectors, and magazines. The public actions and installations discussed thus far current Cable only, graphic or electronic forms, with the exception of a few remnants held by friends located along the artist's regular migratory routes. Most of his works return to the environment from which they were scavenged, thus eliminating the possibility of aesthetic baggage as an anathema to such a wander­

ing soul. In 1995, during one of his sojourns to Santiago, Rivera-Seguel team up with Ximena Zomos to create an exhibition entitled Lo Real. The show, which took place in an abandoned building, questioned the "normal course of artistic events in today's Chile," and how avant-garde art has been marginalized by the country's cultural institutions. The meaning of "the real," as referred to in the show's title, was inverted by these artists in an effort to sabo­

tage Chile's acknowledged art cir­

cuits. Can such an anti-institutional art exist in New Brunswick's official provincial gallery for the current LUZ=LUZ international project, or has Rivera-Seguel finally succumbed to the pressures of mainstream recognition?

Regardless, the Chilean­

Canadian's installation A B DICK for Lo Real examined the evacuated edifice's history, which was origi­

nally a nineteenth-century villa that had been converted into a commercial space in the mid­

twentieth century. The structure's modern corrugated metal façade

masked its former colonial exi­

tence to passers by. While cleaning up a room that had served as a graphics studio for the A B DICK advertising firm, the artist decided to return the space to its residential origins. Using dilapidated fur­

niture and appliances he created surreal living quarters that includ­

ing a blue bed frame, a table with extended legs, a stove with a wooden exhaust pipe, and a sink without faucets. This symbolic re­

cuperation of history via art pre­

sented viewers with an example of how the present or real is only an accumulated layer of the past.

The machinery of Western art history was the focus of Rivera­

Seguel's 1996 solo exhibition Art in America, created during one of his rare winter stays in Canada at Montreal's Quartier Éphémère.

Using massive sheets of recycled paper to create floor installation entitled Barri­

cades, the artist converted a dank basement studio into an arch­

e­

typal white cube gallery. Around the works of fine art on display in this fraudulent space was a collection of discarded chairs with a silt­

ouette of the artist's profession set into their respective seats. This image appeared in repetitive tile-like fashion on the paper floor and a single signed edition was set in gold frame that hung on the gallery's most prominent wall. The repeated use of his own image parodied the celebrity status that galleries, magazines, critics, and curators confer upon artists, and how such discreetly manufactured idols are governed by cultural as well as economic power structures. Rivera-Seguel's own sil­

houettes is LUZ=LUZ is the artist's fundamental image, and it func­

tions as an international corporate logo of cultural dissent.

Another more elaborated chair, from his 1996 installation, con­

structed from scrap wood uphol­

stered with Art in America magazines again refers to the print media's central function as a prime signifier of artistic merit and monetary value. The pointed ends of rusty nails protruding from this fragile piece of furniture's seat confirm its non-utilitarian status, as the chair has turned to a useless and ultimately empty symbol of post-modern musing. Perhaps, the most telling expression of Rivera-Seguel's irreverence to­

wards the art world's hierarchies was a cross-shaped floor assem­

blage manufactured from old wooden slats and newspapers. Its vertical axis was terminated by four black, white, and grey painted portraits honouring the twentieth-
century "masters": Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, and Claudio Rivera-Seguel. The Canadian-Chilean’s alliance of himself with these once radical artists, was a testament to their collective influence upon his work and the ability of mainstream cultural institutions to co-opt the avant-garde.

In many respects Claudio Rivera-Seguel's LUZ=LUZ international project in Fredericton, Paris, and Santiago mark both a culmination and shift in his art of the 1990s. The trajectory of his work thus far is linked by a tendency towards socio-political posturing, which has taken the form of public actions as well as installations. He routinely rejects the fundamental tenets of late Capitalism, and employs art to reveal the less attractive realities of Western cultural phenomenon. This attitude has been informed by the human tragedies he has witnessed in Chile, and the fine line that this artist perceives between military dictatorship and liberal democracy. Mass media forms are used as tools against a range of middle-class assumptions, which the artist alters in a multi-linguistic and symbolic process.

The nomadic Chilean-Canadian has rarely applied in advance or been selected by a gallery or cultural institution for the many shows he has participated in over the past decade. Rather, Rivera-Seguel prefers to organize his own shows and issue catalogues based on the locations and resources at hand in any given city across three continents. Such artistic autonomy is a necessary part of his unique life, and it has enabled him to develop a very sophisticated aesthetic of survival. Urban refuse in its many forms is the basic vocabulary of his performance and architectonic-based creations, providing viewers with glaring examples of how Western societies are incessantly manufacturing, over consuming, and then carelessly discarding the planet's resources. However, the highly produced new objects in LUZ=LUZ, including massive banners, t-shirts, key chains, posters, and cards are signs of the artist's recent efforts to extend his manipulation of formats as well as spaces into the realm of pure mimicry. Rivera-Seguel's electronic messages on a public sign board in Fredericton, posters on media boards in metros throughout Paris, and signs in advertising light boxes along the boulevards of Santiago also contribute to this truly international anti-art marketing campaign during the years 1999 and 2000.

LUZ=LUZ (Spanish term for light equals light) is an enigmatic equation, perhaps referring to the relationship between art and life. For this Chilean-Canadian has developed a very complex visual method of undermining the contemporary art scene's trappings, in a larger effort to question how social values are entrenched. The interior displays at each venue include a series of light boxes with text and photographs featuring the artist standing in front of selection of cultural, commercial, and spiritual institutions. Phrases pasted above and below the images function as counter signifiers, questioning commonly held beliefs that are central to Western society. Art does not equal art is undoubtedly the overriding slogan of his current show, and it has been combined with his own silhouette to create a fictitiously registered corporate logo. The official looking logo is emblazoned on the plethora of manufactured articles mentioned above, not to mention its communication over the internet and throughout this publication. It will also be rendered via a series of public actions on lawns, roadsides, and urban sites yet to be determined. Such a process represents the artist's attempt to flood an international public with an easily understood symbol of parody. Two massive banners on The Beaverbrook Art Gallery's façade with giant artefact trade marks are the most bombastic and architectonic evocation of his nihilistic message. Are the institutional settings and highly finished nature of LUZ=LUZ a contradiction of Claudio Rivera-Seguel's artistic ethics, or does this internationally co-ordinated effort reflect a new direction for him into the next millennium?

Vesna Perunovich's Red E Scape installation delineates the problematical territory between our desire for intimate contact and our fear of vulnerability. So Many Lures, So Little Time, the centrepiece in Perunovich's exhibition, simultaneously attracts and repels.

We want to come closer, to touch the metal bed-frame's weathered textures, but caution tells us to keep our distance. Barbed hooks and brightly coloured fishing lures hang like a shimmering cloud overhead. Suspended below the fishing lures, just above the tensely-spiralled bedsprings, are red droplets; small sand-filled cloth bags the colour of blood.

So Many Lures, So Little Time gives substance to a human dilemma. When we open ourselves up to a lover or friend, we accept the possibility of being hurt. Yet, to fully explore our emotional capacities, we must acknowledge a paradox; that physical violence can occur within the most tender sexual experience, and that psychological exploitation sometimes occurs among the best of friends.

A familiar object of our social landscape, Perunovich’s double bed is a delicate wire structure that could be perceived as a romantic site for seduction and pleasure. Curving tracery at the head and foot appears like a line drawing, softening the rectangular geometry of the metal skeleton and questioning whether the bed is sturdy enough to support a body—let alone the rambunctious intercourse of two bodies.

For all its familiarity in domestic life, in Perunovich's installation the bed is a hazardous zone. Her bright hooks shiver suspended in the air. The red cloth bags hang heavily. They may be imaginative of drops of blood but they also convey the weightiness of body bags. Every interpretation suggests the threat of wounding, of violation, of wracking pain. Inevitably, rape comes to mind.

So Many Lures, So Little Time