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EDITOIRIAL

BORN PROVOCATEURS

I hesitated at length before deciding to tackle the following matter. I told myself that I could have sent a letter or article to the newspaper in question, deploring what I had read. But recognizing the intentional provocation in this case, with all it entails, I chose not to wash dirty laundry in front of a readership often misinformed about the visual arts, not to reinforce the negative image of internal discord and quarrelling that eternally plagues the visual arts community. It was terribly disappointing to see a “major” daily show so little judgment in this area, to see it grossly misinterpreting the intentions of creators of present-day art, which act like petty thieves or unacceptable terrorists or, at best, immature teenagers abusing their powerful and vulnerable position. Far be it from me to oppose the questioning of the system by creators and their works, since this is how art is built. I am well aware that you can’t have a revolution without rebellion and that transgressing the status quo keeps society healthy. But I will never adhere to things done or said to the detriment of human values.

For the facts. In the Saturday, September 9, 2007, edition of Le Devoir, a front-page article by Frédérique Doyon titled “Creators of comparable status, artists are criminal or murderous, or that Islamic terrorists are” (“Majors...”) and published under the headline “As the century of unbounded curiosity, covetous looking and the de-regulation of the gaze, the twentieth has not been the century of the image, as is often claimed, but of optics—and, in particular, of the optical illusion, and media studies, it is essential that we correctly interpret the work. None of these terms renders the current relationship between individual and artwork is ‘experiencer.’...”

This assertion dates to 1998, but already it appears incomplete when compared to the work art has developed in the twenty-first century. Viewing now seems to be taking a backseat to bodily experience, particularly in the area of new media art. While it is true that art has always been defined as a science of images that evoke and have the power to represent, it is also true that there has been a major paradigm shift in the theory and discourse regarding it. In this era of participatory democracy or a genuine desire to co-create? In these practices designed with a view to reception/perception, how do the notions of catharsis, pleasure, compassion, cruelty, identification and illusion pertain? This issue of ETC ponders these questions with an in-depth reading of the nature of alliances between artist and audience.

Christine Desrochers
and, especially, our way of entering into contact with it. It is even conceivable that painting and photography, media that result in static images, can be reassessed from the perspective of the notion of the body as an entity that never stops being active, so that cinema, installations and, these days, intelligent sculptures that react to human presence are most obvious in soliciting the active involvement of the experiencer's body, they may not be alone. For instance, do we know how our bodies react to certain colours? As Duchamp, whose work is at stake, says: "...that which occurs outside of our awareness. Hence, an intelligent body, whose entire surface is engaged with the artwork. The art of Bill Viola offers striking evidence in this regard. Since the eighties, as we know, Viola has been creating works that envelop the experience and immersing us in deep, guttural sounds and images that plunge us into the mind. The experience is so intense that our thinking has not yet integrated the newly acquired knowledge. One indication of its nature is the fact that most people exposed to Viola's installations want to relive the experience and report that it has marked them with "...being able to say exactly how". The importance afforded the body in the process of knowledge is mainly attributable to Viola's work. Today, technological advances allow artists to establish parameters that involve the experiencer's body to an even greater degree. For example, the body seems to have, and, accordingly, the character of the body also has a new role. The body possesses the ability to synthesize and analyze; in fact, it has a life of its own, independent of its occupant. This approach to the body is similar to that taken in alternative medicine. Building on the notion that a signal sent to the brain as a result of manipulations can change the physical state of the body, the body accumulates experiences, and constructs itself from them.

In art, we now accept that the physical presence of the body in a work is an immaterial presence. The body is there, we see it there, but it is not there. It is the experience that is the body. Indeed, the body constitutes the artwork, and the experience of the body is the artwork.

But precisely what upheaval does the intelligent body provoke? For a better understanding, it may be helpful to look to Marcel Duchamp, whose vitally important contribution to the art of the sixties and, assuredly, of today is put into perspective in a new light. Duchamp is considered the artist of the sixties and of today, and his work, and especially the works created at the end of his life, has been reconsidered in the light of the body. The body has been considered in the work of artists such as William Kentridge, whose work over the past two and a half decades has always been on a unique language of the body. And as a result of his choreographic research, many a spectator has experienced moments of great intensity. Bordering on pure, primal impulse, the energy that Chouinard and her dancers deploy on stage reaches beyond the borders of our consciousness, making the body central to the definition of art. Moreover, the idea that the artist and the artwork are merely media or devices that precede its full realization.

Artworks that the artist creates are the result obtained. He adds that, while the coefficient measures the "weight of the work on the aesthetic scale," which is determined solely by the spectator. The artist signifies the existence of an element that he defines as the "art experiential," which he adds to the creative act. Duchamp calls "spectator"? Before answering this question, let us briefly deconstruct their worlds and conceptually fascinating, one by Marie Chouinard and the other by Lynn Hershman Leeson - to briefly reconstruct their mechanisms and see whether the individual's body prevails over a more rational and conventional approach. Marie Chouinard is first and foremost a choreographer and dancer. But what intelligence is this? The intelligence that the experiencers bring to the body by interpreting and decoding effects that they trigger, or simply the chance intelligence offered as potential interaction by the computer? Whatever the case, the scowling-faced heads are meaningful and speak to the origin of things: sexual drive, anger, tenderness, eroticism. The notion that the image of the heads renders the meaning of the experiencers' impulses through their movements and the rhythm of the music. In the case of the "Trusted Head," the heads are the gestural translation. And insofar as they throw themselves into the game of exploring expression, the experiencers become part of the work.

On another level, the work of Lynn Hershman Leeson glides between the fictional and the virtual. The recent piece Life Squared (2007) reveals to experiencers that, for years now, the artist has been constructing a simulation in which reality and fiction intertwine. The apparent uniqueness of the work lies in the appropriation of virtual space by a fictitious persona whose virtual reality is disrupted by the presence of a "virtual" body. But what intelligence is this? The intelligence that the experiencers use when they throw themselves into the game of exploring expression, the experiencers become part of the work.

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The creative act, he says, "...is not performed by the artist alone;" the creative act is not performed by the artist alone. Indeed, the artist is not the only one who gives life to the artwork.

Manon Blanchette

Endnotes
3 ibid, p. 436
For this feature dedicated to defining the specificity of today's spectator, we sat down with Quebec stage director Brigitte Haentjens -- recipient of the Siminovich Prize in Theatre and the National Theatre School's Gascon-Thomas Award in 2007 -- to get her thoughts on and expectations of theatre audiences.

Isabelle Lelarge: What type of theatre do you create, and how long have you been doing it?

Brigitte Haentjens: I began actively working in theatre in 1977 and went through various stages. For fifteen years, I concentrated on playwriting, collective creations and new plays by Franco-Ontarian writers, such as Jean-Marc Dalpé. Later, around 1989-90, I moved to Montreal, where I spent three years in a more institutional setting as artistic director of Théâtre Denise Pellerin. I directed several repertory plays there, but also at Espace GO. TMN and elsewhere. At the time, my style was fairly traditional, but after leaving Théâtre Denise Pellerin I adopted a much more radical approach. Sibyllines, the company that I founded, presents almost nothing but contemporary work based on literary or theatrical texts.

I. L.: What's the difference between the two?

B. H.: A play has characters, a story, an intrigue, situations and, especially, dialogue. What interests me more and more are texts that leave lots of room for the staging. I tend to choose literary material, adaptations of novels, poetical texts. But not exclusively, obviously.

My work has also evolved significantly in formal terms. And I'm the producer now, which gives me lots of artistic elbowroom. If I want to work with fifty actresses, I'm free to do so, provided I plan for and make other sacrifices. This situation obviously changes the nature of the projects, but also the nature of my contact with the actors and designers. It also allows me to oversee the image, the news releases, the posters and the visual material.

I'm passionate about contemporary theatre. Because of my education and training, I'm attracted more by European than by North American intellectual and cultural considerations.

I also favour theatre that expresses a feminine point of view, but that doesn't mean militant theatre (I'm not on any soapbox). I enjoy staging what women have to say, I like to deal with questions about femininity, about the relationship between art and the feminine.

I. L.: Who makes up the intended audience for this material?

B. H.: I don't know precisely who they are. In Montreal, there are three to four thousand people interested in plays that some media call "demanding," which I guess means not primarily aimed at a showy reading of the play. For example, we produce in-depth, informative programs on literary or theatrical texts.

I. L.: When you choose a play, do you immediately think of the cast?

B. H.: Yes, I find it puzzling. And frankly catastrophic! What's going to happen in 20 to the only cultivated people are women? What will they be able to talk about with the men they share their lives with? Also, I see a certain male sectarianism: during the run of Tout comme elle, I heard comments from men like "mother-daughter relationships don't interest me." It's the story of their mother, their sister, their girlfriend, and yet they say it doesn't concern them. I don't get it, because men concern interests and interests.

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I. L.: After the performance?

B. H.: Yes, there are sessions very fulfilling, very gratifying. They enrich the artistic experience for everyone. Artistic education and artistic dialogue are lacking in our society. Then again, art needs to maintain some mystery. When you go see a painting, you don't always understand it, at least not right away, and that's not a problem. Art doesn't exist to forge consensus reactions.

I. L.: How do you decide which play to choose?

B. H.: It's an ongoing process. I can't really tell you how it's organized or structured. I always have three or four projects on my mind, and then at a certain point the line-up for the next few years becomes clear: what we'll do when, before or after what. It's an ongoing process. I can't really tell you how it's organized or structured. I always have three or four projects on my mind, and then at a certain point the line-up for the next few years becomes clear: what we'll do when, before or after what. It's a work in permanent progress.

I. L.: When you choose a play, do you immediately think of the cast?

B. H.: No, I don't think about the audience until the day before the opening! For me, the important thing is the artistic voice, the urgency of what there is to say, and how we want to convey it. I'm available to the audience every night, because I never miss a performance. But performers are not teachers. They shouldn't have to come in Friday and explain to the audience what they're acting. Our role is to express a point of view, to present a work. The audience is very important to me, but not as part of the artistic process.

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I. L.: You mean you would refuse that sort of invasive sponsorship?

B. H.: Yes, or a car on the stage. That totally confuses the communication. It's like going to a theatre named for a tobacco company or watching a show on a stage named for a brand of beer.

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I. L.: Do you work with a specific public in mind?

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On the other hand, I try to facilitate the public's connection with the play, as for example, we produce in-depth, informative programs based on extensive research (they are written by Stéphane Lépine), and we hold talkback sessions with the audience.

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Isabelle Lévesque on August 17, 2007

I. L.: Well, that settles the problem, and that's the price of freedom.

B. H.: Yes, the price of freedom.

I. L.: Some people working in the visual arts have no idea that participatory theatre is nothing new. It makes me wonder.

B. H.: Performance, a forgotten tradition. As far as I'm concerned, the whole spectator-actor business makes me shudder. It's very troubling.

I. L.: Troubling for the plays?

B. H.: Yes, plays can be drained of their meaning by this notion. More and more, the only thing that counts is quantitative communication, the number of spectators a show draws. It's true that you have to be in shape to go to the theatre, it's a demanding art, and that's true of art in general. Making believe that all things are equal, that there's no difference between taking in a comedy routine and going to see a play, that everything is consumed the same way, is just plain wrongheaded. Art requires thought, and presence.

In the way of the non-participatory theatre, it doesn't make much sense to judge the work of a beginner and that of a mature artist as if they were equally important, giving them the same number of lines in the paper. Today, there's a dominant discourse that stems from a sort of cheap democratic democratization. It's a tactic that helps not to develop audiences but to grow consumers. Instead of providing real artistic education, everything seems to focus on informing consumers. On letting them know whether they're going to get their money's worth.

In the media, this discourse discredits the role and contribution of intellectuals, and thus of artists. The whole anti-intellectual slant conveyed in the media, for example on Radio-Canada (which never misses an opportunity to draw attention to something that is "accessible," or "difficult") is aimed at making art into mush for the masses, all-dressed pizza. This is the age of celebrity, of celebritization, conveyed in the media, for example on Radio-Canada (which never misses an opportunity to draw attention to something that is "accessible," or "difficult") is aimed at making art into mush for the masses, all-dressed pizza. This is the age of celebrity, of celebritization, where people have the impression that anyone can do anything.

The success of reality shows stems from a society that pretends that everything is equivalent, that everybody can achieve fame. For Saadah, everyone has the same rights and privileges as the performers. I'm not saying that their charisma has to be a physical and psychological feat.

I. L.: Have you done plays that haven't worked?

B. H.: No! But at the same time I can feel that things aren't working.

I. L.: Have you done plays that haven't worked?
This therapeutic mission was intended for "micro communities" (Angela Bulloch), or invitations to exhibition visitors to share their photographs and memories (Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster), or even empathetic communion with the artist's friends and family, living or dead (the "portrait" series by Felix Gonzalez-Torres). According to Blanche format (Brussels, Rome, Shanghai, Madrid, Montreal, Toronto, Naples, Tel-Aviv, Riga and even Gaza), stems from the "mobilising and profitable" concept of culture in times of crisis. In fact, since the turn of the century, this conception has dominated public policy and mass representations of art, as well as numerous artistic creations produced by the relational generation. Today, its focus is less on participative processes - although they have not disappeared completely - than on reviving the synaesthetic models of early modernity (linking colours, sounds and sensations), as seen in the technological development of viewer capture and immersion devices, and the return of the kinetic-cybernetic ideology (interaction, dynamogeneity, computable concept of the brain, feedback theory, etc.). One example is Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's Cosmodrome, presented in 2003 at the Lyon Biennale and this year in her large solo exhibition Expodrome, at the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris. This light show simulates the optical, tactile and auditory sensations of an imaginary journey that is programmed etc. One example is Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's Cosmodrome, presented in 2003 at the Lyon Biennale and this year in her large solo exhibition Expodrome, at the Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris. This light show simulates the optical, tactile and auditory sensations of an imaginary journey that is programmed...
Nuit Blanche and Lille 2004, these events are driven solely by economic aspirations and contribute to the increasingly stringent control of our societies, which is facilitated by the religiosity and mass-oriented industrial signs — and the subjects’ shared aesthetic aspirations: to identify with modiﬁed optimistic entities, to project themselves through rosily optimistic entities, to feel stimulated by dizzying, dynamic engines. It appears that the neo-avant-garde aspirations — the emancipation, however minutely utopian, of subjects alienated by the “society of the spectacle” — expressed by Bourriaud in Relational Aesthetics have been totally sterilized and transformed, in favor of the ascension of artists in the industrial standardization of art and the aesthetic affect that they dispense. 

The result is a "Disneylandification" of public spaces and of art, synonymous with a benevolent, optimistic and jolly mock metabolism of undesirable feelings and living conditions. Viewers are considered customers, passive or participating consumers of programmed experiences apt to occasionally relieve their depression, their sense of loss of meaning and social connection. True, according to Bourriaud’s portrayal of the “lambdā” subject, consuming reified aesthetic experiences is a remedy for the even sadder reification of social relationships in everyday work and home life. This marketing conception of experience underlies the development of mediated sublimated-consumption technologies (the re-enchantment of consumption thanks to interactive marketing) using emotion-control strategies that are assumed by the citizen-control devices found in Nuit Blanche and other events. In other words, the things criticized and battled by the avant-gardes (reification, kitsch and aestheticization of the political) and, when Debord’s Society of the Spectacle came to anticipate certain avant-garde dreams of realizing the dominant art (kinetic art and New Realism) reflect a technocommunicative and consumption/leisure society-celebrative ideology. Deuze offered this ironic view in 1967: "bathing in the cultural, (the artist) will administer puppet theatres and spectacle in nature, spectators will be able to watch the horses of this dizzying merry-go-round: social responsibility, intervention in popular culture, triumphant teaching of the vates, so-called editor of the masses, proud to at last see one’s inner calling coincide with the exercise of a worthwhile function?"

This situation is a result of a total mediation of the avant-gardes’ emancipative aims and their theoretical bases, since the ﬁrst critiques of reification — contemporaries perpetuating Marxist theory1 — (to whom Bourriaud refers in Formes de vie, 1999) — rose up against any form of religiosity or effort to assimilate art to mass society. What is the time, the same aspirations were seen in the cybernetic theories of Frank Popper, champion of kinetic art.2

Deuze and his colleagues have developed in La contemplation de la nature, 2007, the re-evaluation of kineticism, discussed later, see G. Agamben, Réification: d’un dispositif? (Trouble, no. 6, 2006), pp. 40. This book casts a ﬁnely critical eye on the triumph of liberal, communicational and reactionary ideologies in the eighties.

Ibid., p. 329.

4 R. Krauss, “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum,” October, no. 54 (Fall 1990), pp. 3-17.

5 L’art contemporain et son exposition, conference held at Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, October 2002.

6 At this conference, Thierry Raspail pointed to several installations that the Musée d’Art Contemporain de Lyon had acquired under his direction and whose importance he measured in terms of the cubic meters of storage space they required.

7 On this point I subscribe to the analysis of M. Jimenez, who affirms that such events are “enigmatic control society and like soccer” can be conceived as “the privileged instrument for manipulating the masses.” Paper delivered at a seminar at the University of Sapienza, Rome, May 2006, quoted by B. Stiegler and A. Industries, in Réenchantement du monde (Paris: Flammarion, 2008), p. 46.

8 As one Disney designer says in a 1975 company handbook, “What we create is a Disney Realism, sort of Utopian in nature, where we carefully program out all the negative, unwanted elements and ... by the conformist vision of Disney’s American society and social control strategies.

9 The very concept of device implies a notion of control and program, excluding any use not incorporated into it beforehand. See G. Agamben, Qu’est-ce qu’un dispositif? (Paris: Rivages, 2007).

10 In his notes on participative art, Pierre Restany, author of the New Realism manifesto (1960) and member of all ministerial cabinets under Jacques Chaban-De­ımas (participation advocate), calls for the development of “an explanatory aesthetic related to the fundamental problems of total art, psychosensory communication and the organization of space” (1971). At the time, the same aspirations were seen in the cybernetic theories of Frank Popper, champion of kinetic art.

11 Tristan Trémeau

Endnotes


6 At the same time, these synesthetic models were subjected to theoretical re-evaluation and historical positioning in conjunction with major exhibitions, notably in Paris. Aux origines de l’abstraction 1800-1914 (Musée d’Orsay, 2003). Source: Musées Lumière et Arts d’Avant-Garde (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2004).

7 On the re-evaluation of kineticism, discussed later, see D. Dezeuze, Le tournant passager de l’art contemporain, 1999.


9 This was an imaginary voyage to Antarctica, complete with snow, ice and fog pump. Tristan Trémeau, 2002.

10 We won fifteen years of high proﬁle: all of Europe now knows that Lille is a city that counts! (Laurant Diezma, General Coordinator, Lille 2004: 2004: The regions business leaders feel this renowned every day and are glad to see the city’s “grey image dispelled” (Bruno Bondowille, President, Chamber of Commerce). Both quotes are from the article ‘Lille porté par son label bien après, 2004.’ Le Monde, September 9-10, 2007. The Lille 3000 program is playing out every second year – Phase 1 took place in 2006 (Bombayes) – to reduce the risks of post-creative trauma for residents and, especially, for the project’s managers (www.lille3000.com).
En 1987, Krzysztof Wodiczko a formulé une des critiques les plus concises de l'art dans les lieux publics « en tant que forme de légitimation politique ». Il soutenait que l'art public devait s'engager dans des défis stratégiques définissant l'exploitation économique et psychologique de la cité. Décrit l'œuvre de la nouvelle avant-garde comme une intelligence critique, il proposait aux institutions de diffusion massive de l'information et de la culture une collaboration critique, afin de gagner du temps et de l'espace et d'éviter les conséquences. Parmi les créations du public à l'échelle de la cité les plus réussies de cette période, mentionnons Chambres d'amis, un événement organisé à Gand en 1986, auquel ont collaboré plus de 50 artistes, ainsi que Skulptur Projekte, un projet qui incluait plus de 70 interventions dans la ville de Münster, en 1987, et Places with a Past, une série d'installations propres aux lieux du Festival Spoleto de Charleston, en 1991. Suivant Johanne Lamoureux, ce qui caractérise ce genre de projets, c'est en partie le fait qu'ils prélèvent leurs distances par rapport à l'idée d'une spécificité du lieu pour s'intéresser à l'avenir des lieux. C'est ainsi que le projet de ce genre a été élaboré par le groupe ATSA, un organisme à but non lucratif créé en 1997, en vue de créer des œuvres d'interventions urbaines sous forme d'installations, de performances ou de mises en scène réalisées faisant foi des abstractions sociales, environnementales et patrimoniales. L'ATSA ou Action Terroriste Socialement Acceptable se donne pour mandat de questionner le paysage urbain et de redonner à la place publique sa dimension citadine d'espace politique ouvert aux discussions et aux débats de société. ATSA prône une vision non hermétique de l'activisme artistique qui sert à définir des limites aux projets de développement commerciaux. Le groupe s'est surtout fait connaître jusqu'à maintenant par son projet intitulé FRAG sur la Main (2002), une série de 32 compositions graphiques installées à différents emplacements sur le boulevard Saint-Laurent, dit également « la Main ». Ce parcours visuel traite des différents courants qui ont marqué l'histoire sociale, culturelle et économique du boulevard Saint-Laurent, ainsi que de personnalités connues qu'on associe à l'esprit de ce lieu. Un projet similaire d'art urbain éphémère a récemment été réalisé par Paysages éphémères sur l'avenue du Mont-Royal. Paysages éphémères décrit ses projets comme des « interventions urbaines » conçus pour « surprendre et amuser les citoyens ». Dans le groupe des gagnants du concours 2007, la seule pièce réussie était 21 visages en tête, créée par l'équipe des architectes Brière, Gilbert + associés. Inutile de mentionner le succès de l'exposition sur la Main de l'année passée à peindre le projet présente les visages de 21 personnages historiques qui ont donné au mot intervention tout son sens. La leçon qu'il convient de sa fortune perdue - un rappel de la précarité du capitalisme. Bien que FRAG sur la Main présente le processus de réification. Bien que FRAG sur la Main présente un contenu beaucoup moins sectaire que 21 visages en tête, il ne va pas beaucoup plus loin que la reproduction graphique des artefacts de la fête ethnique et des souvenirs des chambres de commerce locales. Il n'est donc pas étonnant qu'un des principaux bailleurs de fonds du projet - en plus de la Ville de Montréal et du gouvernement du Québec - soit la Société du développement du boulevard St-Laurent. Malheureusement, il se trouve que FRAG est à l'arrêt car le Cavalier de Saint-Urbain est à une introduction électronique à l'histoire sociale. Que ces deux groupes en soient ou non conscients, leur travail a eu un précurseur important en 1992 avec le projet Lower Manhattan Sign Project, de REPOhistory, une série de 39 repères historiques conçus comme interventions tactiques, mais également dans l'esprit d'une manifestation grand public. Par opposition à l'histoire des projets dont il a été question plus haut, Sign Project se voulait un engagement en faveur de ce que le philosophe Michel Foucault a appelé l'histoire effective, c'est-à-dire un déplacement des référents historiques fixes qui est saisie de manière complète, comme relation à une mémoire organisée « incarnée ». Le collectif REPOhistory, fondé en 1989, est un cercle d'étude réunissant des artistes, des professeurs et des activistes. Contrairement à ATSA et à Paysages éphémères, REPOhistory est ouvertement engagé dans le secteur de la production culturelle, et non une activité de peintre du dimanche. Le collectif REPOhistory fait exclusivement appel au soutien d'organismes publics, comme le Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, la Municipal Art Society (New York), la Société culturelle de New York, le département des Transports et le conseil municipal de New York. Cette collaboration avec les organismes publics peut avoir aidé le collectif à introduire le contenu critique de plusieurs de leurs symboles. Par exemple, un signe désignant l'emplacement d'un marché d'esclaves du XVIIIe siècle, en précisant que New York était, à l'époque, le deuxième plus grand centre urbain de commerce d'esclaves aux États-Unis. Avant l'intervention de REPOhistory, nous avions commencé à en parler depuis la somette de sa fortune perdue - un rappel de la précarité du capitalisme. À la différence de ATSA et de Paysages éphémères, REPOhistory a donné au motif de voyage toute son ampleur. Il semble que le voyage peut aider à introduire les arts publics et la musique dans la production culturelle. L'adresse du site Web de l'ATSA est www.atsa.ca. L'adresse du site Web de l'ATSA est www.atsa.ca. L'adresse du site Web de l'ATSA est www.atsa.ca.