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Altogether. Each in its Own Place
Artefact Urban Sculpture in Montreal, 2007
Artefact, Ile Sainte-Hélène, Montreal. Curator: Gilles Daigneault, co-curator: Nicolas Mavrikakis. June 27 - September 30, 2007

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ALTOGETHER: EACH IN ITS OWN PLACE:
ARTEFACT URBAN SCULPTURE IN MONTREAL, 2007

007 is the third episode of Artefact, a tri-annual urban sculpture project in Montreal. Information on the website outlines the curatorial injunctions since the beginning of the project in 2001. Artefact prescribes that the project be nomadic (it should be organized in a different site each time), and that it should take place in a meaningful, well-visited public site in Montreal.

Having visited the project two weeks before closing in late September, I came away with the experience that the simple curatorial directives of Artefact have facilitated an inventive complication between the terms *site*, *sculpture* and *public*. What I mean is that, rather than simply framing and addressing sculptural practices in public contexts, treating both as two already defined territories, Artefact opts to experiment with what site, sculpture and public might be. By embracing the nomadic and the provisional as its experimental core, Artefact promotes fluid and temporary alliances between its three constituent terms, allowing each to maximize its potential by drawing from and infecting the others. This is what I perceived to be the strength of the project as indicated by the artworks.

In concordance with its mandate on the nomadic, the current site selected is the former site of *Expo 67* on Île Sainte-Hélène. Immediately, a complex of interrelated themes, histories and utilities can be identified from this current choice of site. Utopia, urban development, Montreal, landscape, leisure, architecture/architectural landmark, the future, the imaginary future of the sixties, dream – are the multiple lines of potentialities traversing the site, awaiting to be actualized through creative encounters with sculptural and public intervention. Here we can imagine Île Sainte-Hélène as a topology of complicity, where site, sculpture, and public are loosened from their already constituted internal history, once again ready to be recomposed into new configurations of affinity, alliance and arrangement. Sculpture too, in Artefact, refers not so much to a tradition or a particular kind of discourse than to a unique form of power that engenders new, unforeseen forms of encounter with site and public.

Twenty artists were selected from five continents. Aside from working *in situ*, they were also asked to respond to the notion of the architectural "folly". This injunction, however loosely interpreted by the artists, is nonetheless intended to draw the work into close proximity to a number of still existing, as well as memories of past pavilions on the site. Architectural follies however, are capable of eliciting a certain excess in terms of desire and its attending pleasure, as well as harmless and playful transgressions to the norm. This "tone" of play and transgression is evident in a number of pieces. Being architectural and/or sculptural, the artworks-as-follies also served as markers on the

leisure ground of Île Sainte-Hélène, installed along a path that can be completed by foot in just over an hour. As is the case of any large-scale exhibition, some works are more successful than others. In Artefact, I believe that the manner in which the work "surveys" and becomes complicit with the past and present potentials of the site is crucial; the form of the work creatively actualizes the real and imagined possibilities that permeate Île Sainte-Hélène. Below are reflections of my encounters with a number of them.

Diane Borsato's *Eclipse, Wednesday February 21, 2007* is a photo-documentation of an event in which a giant snowball is created by two female friends presumably on the date indicated in the work's title. Now the gesture of eclipse in question inscribes the joy of snowball making on one fine winter's day within an architectural discourse. It is Buckminster Fuller's architectural signature, the geodesic dome – put under erasure here by Borsato's human-size snowball – that is set up as a kind of counter-signature to the master's.

From the angle of the photograph, the snowball nearly completely obscured the male master's world-renowned geodesic dome. The intervention is particularly significant since Fuller's dome, being one of the most publicized architectural landmarks of the city of Montreal, has become recognized as the architectural identity of the city. Borsato's gesture of contestation is certainly subversive, but not antagonistic. I think it is primarily a celebration of creativity, play and humour that draws its power by aligning with Fuller's work. An eclipse is not permanent; it will pass. Fuller's "masterpiece" will soon regain its rightful

place. But during Artefact, Borsato's photo documentation was presented on a banner hung at the entrance of the renowned geodesic dome. I have the feeling that Fuller would identify with Borsato's humour and inventiveness, that he would like the piece very much had he still been alive today. In that sense, Borsato's *Eclipse* can be interpreted as an homage.

Alexandre David's, *Sans titre* is a long wooden plank-like structure that subtly frames the bank of the pond by which it is installed. Though there is nothing apparently radical about this work, it is precisely its humility that allows it to be so properly situated in its vicinity. Its quiet presence gives the landscape a definitive sense of proximity and articulation. David's gesture does not set the work apart from the environment and declare itself as "art". *Sans titre* is a horizonal, counter-monument that replaces heroics with utility – the public can sit, lie, converse, relax on and around it. Space becomes a place where and when architectural intervention demonstrates the quality of propriety.

Although one might elaborate *Sans titre* within an art critical framework, such a positioning is not so relevant to my experience of the work. The structure convinces me primarily in the way it confers value to the site, as well as the very real and human opportunities that it created. Much of its strength came from its deliberate placement, proportion and execution – the very fundamentals of craft and ethic. In a sense, the work is antithetical to the ethos of "designer" art and architecture prevalent today. Sitting on *Sans titre* by the pond, I feel time has slowed down a little – the temporality of the work began to approximate that of the pond. I gain a sense of connection

to a site that is now composed, now restored to just what it is. BGL contributed *La mouche et le sucre* to Artefact. The work looks like a fully realized and functional ice cream vendor outlet, the kind that is commonly seen in parks. Visitors to Île Sainte-Hélène will not find it an anomaly at first glance. But upon closer inspection, or if someone actually wants to purchase ice cream, he or she will find that the vendor window has been closed off and service suspended. With only one small inconspicuous vent left open, and all the interior surfaces coated with *Tanglefoot*, an adhe-

sive coating used by gardeners to eliminate insects, the ice cream parlour functions as a giant insect trap. Thousands of bugs of all kinds have been seduced to enter through the vent, got stuck and eventually expired on the surfaces of the interior. So instead of the promised ice cream, the viewer discovers something else.

In addition to being a trap, *La mouche et le sucre* is a kind of capsule to preserve and display the dead in a way not dissimilar to the way different species of insect, plant and animal life are preserved in a natural history museum. From the exterior, *La mouche et le sucre* is
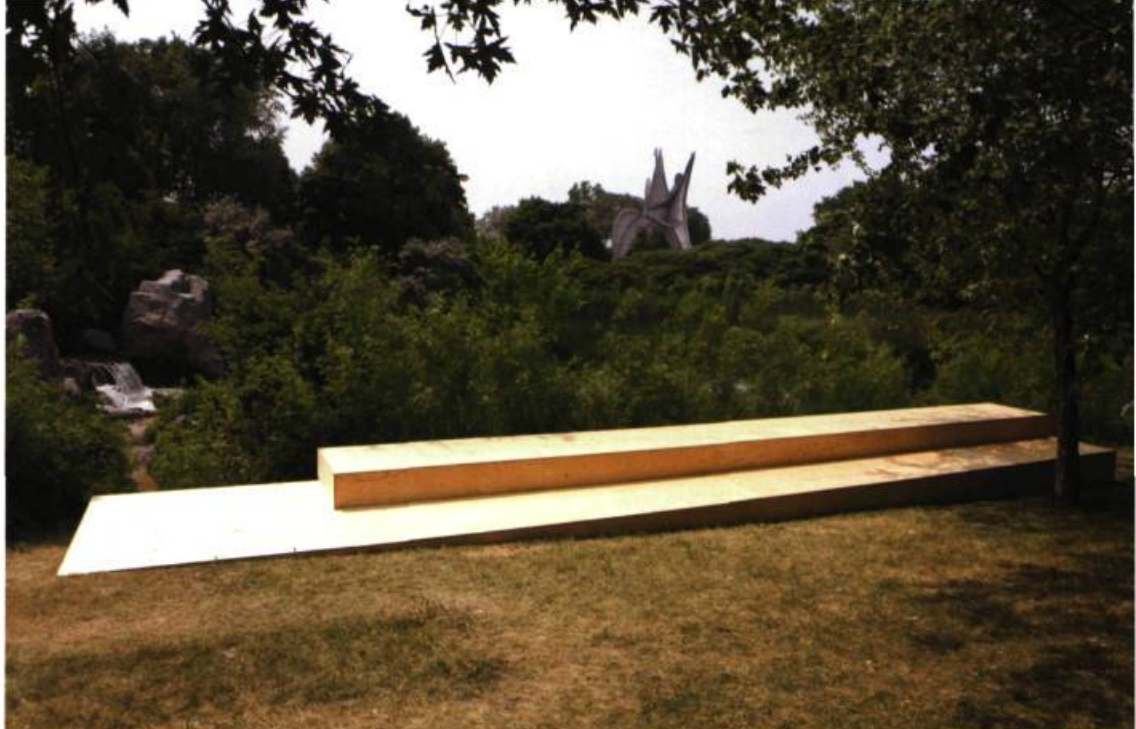
a structure that promises delight for human passersby. But between its exterior and interior, the work effects a complication of humor, wit, culture, nature, desire, death and pleasure – a set of terms and sensibilities that guides BGL's *modus operandi*.

In a couple of cases however, I question if the term "folly" has been given too much and too literal of an architectural incarnation. Therefore, instead of being points of negotiation, the sculptural work is rendered to be sealed as isolated statements/enclosures within Île Sainte-Hélène. In such cases, an opportunity to construct opportunities with the site has been given over to singular artistic intentions that appear to be too premeditated.

According to the information on the official website, Mathieu Lefèvre's *Accès public* "criticizes the art milieu and the relationship that the public has with artworks." In Lefèvre's tower-like structure, various seminal paintings from the western tradition are reproduced, framed and presented in the format of a salon- style painting exhibition. Visitors are required to jump up against a cushioned floor in order to view the reproductions that are hung too high above the convenient eye level.

If as a statement, Lefèvre's work reiterates certain clichés about the dissemination and experience of art, the physical, fun-house activity does little to transform the banality of an already constituted piece of knowledge. I question whether the artist was willing to explore concepts and forms of knowledge that are contingent and material-based. I found Lefèvre's *Accès public* self-limiting on many levels. In Artefact, the limitation became much more evident as the concepts entertained by Lefèvre stood in stark oblivion to the possibilities procured by the site. It is ironic that *Accès public* actually undermines the agency and intelligence of the audience.

In contrast to Lefèvre, Trevor Gould's posters might have been too dispersed, relying too much on the site to provide a cogent experience. With Gould's work I couldn't help but refer to official literature for aid. On the website, it is indicated that Gould's drawings of fairlyland architecture posted on various trees near the former American pavilion "invite us to stroll in a Disney-like enchanted forest next to the former American pavilion." The work, however, remains a concept in the site – an idea that might have worked in the artist's mind but fails as a gesture powerful enough to engage and transform the site.

My reflections on individual works are provisional, but they point to the merits of Artefact. Once sculpture has been disassociated with the white cube, where much of the discipline's institutional history and discourse is constructed, it finds itself faced with new challenges. Artefact provides the rare opportunity for sculpture to nourish and invent itself through its survey of a site. The many engaging works extract and complicate the multivalent trajectories that animate Île Sainte-Hélène through the creation of new forms. To imagine what kinds of pleasures and discovery can be granted by sculptural practices today is one of the most relevant imperatives here. To that extent, my reflections, criticisms and affirmations in this article are possible because Artefact existed.

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Yam Lau is an artist and writer based in Toronto. Currently Lau works in the medium of computer-generated animation and video to explore new expressions of image and space. Lau teaches painting at York University and his work is represented by the Leo Kamen Gallery. His recent exhibitions include solo exhibitions at Optica, in Montreal and La Bande Video, in Quebec City.