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Aller au sommaire du numéro

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PARTICIPATING IN THE BIRTH OF A NEW HUMANISM

By Andrée PARADIS

In the following pages our contributors will speak to you of experiments that concern young sculpture. While preparing this section I happened to reread the admirable dialogue exchanged between President Senghor and André Malraux at the time of an exhibition of African sculpture opened by the French minister during the course of the Festival of Negro Arts at Dakar, and I questioned myself on our young sculptors' state of mind. Are they aware of being a living part of the Mediterranean heritage whose passionate defender Malraux is, which has continued, as much through blood as through spirit, on this side of the Atlantic for more than three hundred years of change in cultural habits? On the other hand, are our sculptors sensitive to the wave of freedom brought by African sculpture to European art at the beginning of the twentieth century? And, still more, are they endeavoring to know what is being sought by the artists of the awakening continents? If this is so, they surely find in their investigations familiar accents and queries that resemble their own, as well as an identical need for taking root and a will to be identified in the context of their era.

When André Malraux asked President Senghor: 'Was the African who sculpted masks not referring to the supernatural of which you spoke, and not to an aesthetic quality?", the President replied: "The aesthetic quality was the means of expression of his supernatural, as in your Kings of Chartres." And, confident in the creative spirit that he tries to develop and foster in his compatriots, the President added: "Ours hold a dialogue with universal art in their way, universal art in their way, as much as you do. It is necessary that they know that the violence of emotion which is Africa was bestowed on them more than on all others. The masks will die, but Africa will not long accept modern western art. We know that all Nature is animated by a human presence: in the end we shall understand this!"

To strive to perceive this reality is to participate in the new humanism which is opposed to cold speculations, intellectual or other, to the trite adventures of fashion and play. It is to be aware of a new spirit we feel dawning here and there. And what will be the future of sculpture in such a context? Only the sculptor can say, for he alone has the power to discover the mystery, the secret of occult forces. Only he can have a premonition of our needs for metamorphosis. Intelligence and persistence are among his best weapons.

Speaking for myself, I would wish that, thanks to the sculptor, our public places, and particularly our parks, would become a source of inspiration and that the wholly-planned integration of sculpture in these areas would contribute to creating a climate conducive to meditation, where man might feel exhilarated in his environment. Is a more frequent use of sculptor too much to ask?

(Translation by Mildred Grand)

THE QUEBEC SCULPTURE COUNCIL

By Claude-Paul GAUTHIER

The Quebec Sculpture Council is a legally constituted body whose responsibility is to ensure the defence of the social and moral rights of Quebec's sculptors, the distribution of sculpture, the co-ordination and transmission of professional information, and which encourages the holding of important cultural events in sculpture in Quebec as well as elsewhere: symposiums, exhibitions, etc.

The Council was formed in spring 1978 by a group of Quebec sculptors aware of the major problems of contemporary sculpture and of the artists who are involved in it. Production, dimensions, weight, transport, market, methods of remuneration, trends, non-commercial character of projects, plans and execution of future conceptual and technological sculpture and the difficulty of categorizing temporary animation and environmental forms of contemporary art lead the artist to seek other forms of social implication and create new collective opportunities of distribution and of comprehension on the part of the public. At the time of the establishing of government cultural policies, for example, it is possible, if one can make oneself heard, to encourage the cultural involvement of private or industrial organizations and to obtain concrete modifications in the mechanisms of artistic production and distribution, on the judicial, legal and economic points of view.

The Quebec Sculpture Council is going ahead with several short- and long-term projects in order to increase the collective opportunities of sculptors in self-determination, distribution and economic autonomy. Certainly, the best marketing can be carried on only by the artist himself, but it is important that sculptors be able to count on public, parapublic and government funds.

One of the most stimulating collective displays of sculpture is the symposium. Several have taken place in Quebec since 1964, the date of the Symposium on Mount Royal in Montreal. During these events, some legal and organizational problems arose. Aware of the necessity of restructuring the norms, the Council set up a study committee which made very definite recommendations on the standards appropriate to assuring the maximum advantage for the artists concerned, selection, working conditions, contractual wage arrangements, and the technological and political means of construction—contacts with industry—with the general aim of permitting technical and conceptual planning, increasing their frequency and guaranteeing their quality. The committee also established a policy intended to emphasize the dissemination of information on these events.

Another fact offers great possibilities for sculptors: the law on the integration of works of art in public buildings, which stipulated that one per cent of the budget of those buildings should be applied to the installation of works of art integrated into architecture.

The Quebec Sculpture Council has created a study committee composed of sculptors Charles Daudelin and Pierre Granche among others, which has submitted precise recommendations to the different levels of government: municipal, provincial and federal.

The following are a few examples of its recommendations:

- Dissemination of information on contracts (open competitions);
- Extension of the 1% law to all ministries, state boards, public or semi-public bodies supported by grants (CEGEPS, school commissions, etc.) and to all buildings renovated or salvaged by these same bodies, to municipalities, etc.;
- The presence of sculptors at preliminary studies of architectural projects;
- The modification of clauses in contracts in such a way as to assure, for example, the further maintenance of the works, pegging of the price of materials, full respect for the artist's right of the artist, maximum protection of the artist with relation to responsibilities incurred, etc.

Another aspect of the development of sculpture in Quebec is marketing and distribution. The Quebec Sculpture Council stresses the work, supports and encourages the initiatives of the milieu in this sense, as much on the national level as on the international level. This is taking the form of a way as to publicize the important works of contemporary Quebec sculptors, it is entirely logical to enter Quebec creations in the international field of the sculpture market and cultural exchanges between countries.

Many studies have been conducted on the socio-economic situation of sculptors (and artists in general), particularly by UNESCO and Statistics Canada. They show, as clearly as possible, that "three artists out of four in Canada are obliged to take another job, while eighty out of one hundred of them earn less than $5000 from their art".

Such is the individual situation of the sculptor. To attempt to remedy it, it is important that the artists come to grips collectively with their involvement in decision-making powers so as to arouse a collective interest in sculpture and increase the opportunities of direct commitment through the right of official say in planning of urban and rural development, in order that they may give a concrete, involved and contemporary meaning to their work, with a view to endorsing sculpture with a cultural, social and human sense other than only an ostentatious dream.
A long time ago, criticism did not really know what to believe about Philip Surrey’s work. Indeed, as early as 1942, in the catalogue for the Aspects of Contemporary Painting exhibition that he had organized for some American cities, Marcel Pirenne had classified Surrey among the non-classifiables, on the fringe of three groups of duly labelled Quebec painters. Later, writers cheerfully contradicted one another on the subject of this artist; now they alternatively denigrated, certainly attractive, but whose images were more meaningful for the small history of Montreal than for the great history of art; now — for instance in the catalogue for the retrospective that the Musée d’Art Contemporain put on for him in 1971 — they regarded Surrey as an abstract painter, ‘much more than Riopelle or Boudrias, who are actually important non-figurative landscapes’. He acknowledges that the subjects he paints interest him, but for the quality of the lights which envelop and transfigure them much more than for their “human interest’. This last element comes far behind all the others when the artist enumerates, in order of importance, the points that capture his attention during the execution of the picture.

This having been said, Surrey also has some obsessions, not pictorial but very human, that warp his vision of the images he encounters in the city and urge him to stop at certain ones which are dim (when they are not clearly oppressive). And the long formal work of which Surrey speaks so freely and which so much delayed the appearance of his pictures in their final form seems to aim only at preserving and, paradoxically, at accentuating the spontaneity of this first ambiguous impression. “Everything is planned in my images; nothing is left to chance or counts on accident”, Surrey would say; his attitude calls to mind that of a Daumier or, especially, of a Degas. As he developed it became clear he was the kind of natural artist to whom the words of the poet Baudelaire apply: “Every work in one way or another turns on the attempt to cope with the residue of more primitive emotion that constantly demands to be taken into account. In succession come periods of justification, negation, denial and concealment. In their detailed working out each represents a progressive lifting of symbolic meaning towards the surface of consciousness.”

The first day I met him he was talking about the trichromatic theory of colour. The gist of it is familiar to anyone with colour T.V. There are three basic colours, red, green and blue; twiddle the knobs to generate all the rest. His version attached itself to the intermediary hues that complement yellow with blue-green and purple-red. If you want it to sound more esoteric you can say “cyan” and “magenta”. In 1969 two jargon words from colour physics pay lip-service to the intellectual inferiority complex of conceptual art.

THE EXPRESSIONISM OF PHILIP SURREY
By Gilles Daigneault

JEFFREY SPALDING’S METAPHORS OF ORDER
By Eric Cameron
A series of paintings equates the three component hues with the sides of triangular canvases. Double bands of colour cross in three directions. They may be dispersed so that the colour fills the space in the corner, leaving the opposite side black, or vice versa. A total of eight patterns emerges, and the eight triangles can be fitted together in any order to open up a vastly greater permutation of hues. The artist had calculated each effect of overlapping hues and mixed a separate colour to match it. The result was ambivalent. The colour system could be read equally plausibly in terms of the additive projection of coloured lights rising to a full white, or as the subtraction of superimposed filters taking it down to a theoretical black. The ambiguity was nice in that it offered the artist an opportunity to guide it into a kind of rootless ambivalent condition corresponding to a changed theoretical interpretation. However, the price was that his painting came out as an illustration of theory, when the reality on which that theory was based lay at the tip of his brush. Paint itself changes light in the manner of just such filters.

The trouble may have been that he did not really believe his text to be a text but only a 'picture'. The problem is that the surface will reveal the subject enclosed within a neutral surround. If the layers are fairly thick it becomes more opaque, so the top layer predominates; if it is thin enough to eliminate that problem it is likely to be so pale the washes may neutralize the effect of individual hues but only accumulate the tone of a weak grey. However, the black paintings represent an emotional peak. The theme in the black paintings is a reexamination of the implications of the triangular paintings, and with its brilliance of component hues. He soon discovered that two or three layers of different colours and kinds of paint, and then to remove the top one by some means that corresponds to a changed theoretical interpretation. However, the price was that his painting came out as an illustration of theory, when the reality on which that theory was based lay at the tip of his brush. Paint itself changes light in the manner of just such filters.

A still more recent series eliminates them again but offers the advantage that the drips spilling over the edge has the effect of relegating them to a subordinated position; these do not disrupt our normal orientation towards the front surface of the painting. From that principal viewpoint the image presents an utterly undifferentiated uniformity which yet yields a sense of pure pictorial potentiality. Ad Reinhardt once said that if he had enough time and energy he would paint a single black, square canvas. The black paintings share with Reinhardt the ability to communicate the mystical aura of renunciation of unseen meanings that have been held back. They are at once pictures of everything and nothing.

In the black paintings one feels the effort needed to keep the human basis of emotion out of sight beneath the surface. Contemporary with them is a videotape that reads almost as a primer to the black paintings because it is the only way these paintings read much more like conventional modern art. The format is simplified, too, by the elimination of the frame. And the applied geometry of his minimal art tends to take their permission from the black square canvases Ad Reinhardt was painting as much as ten years before, but Spalding's work advances the logic of the argument, edge just a little closer to the precipice of meaning where the last trace of pictorial suggestion slips over into a purely literal reading of the object. Moreover he eliminates the arbitrariness of Reinhardt's residual colour distinctions and the applied geometry of his minimal trisection of the field. The basic move is to transform his own formula by the elimination of the frame and yet the anticipation of the possibility of a frame that will conceal the drips over the edge has the effect of relegating them to a subordinated position; these do not disrupt our normal orientation towards the front surface of the painting. From that principal viewpoint the image presents an utterly undifferentiated uniformity which yet yields a sense of pure pictorial potentiality. Ad Reinhardt once said that if he had enough time and energy he would paint a single black, square canvas. The black paintings share with Reinhardt the ability to communicate the mystical aura of renunciation of unseen meanings that have been held back. They are at once pictures of everything and nothing.

The removals in one way represent an extreme of self-denial but they simultaneously readmit internal differentiations within the surface image. A still more recent series eliminates them again but allows a greater variety of colour and acknowledges the symbolic, if not mimetic, importance of the black canvas. Each day for a month he paints the surface completely with the same black spray enamel. The process of abrasion guarantees a virtual impoverishment to the final result, a powdery pallor that offsets the increase in visual content.

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The physical layering of paint has now come to equate with a psychological layering of meaning. In looking back from the perspective of the new work the earlier series gain an added dimension of personal experiences in dynamic interaction. The degree of abstraction does not give access to specific details, but one senses the generality of the human situation inscribed within the surface. The resolution of private tensions within a structure of order takes on the character of a universal metaphor.