

THE AMBIVALENCE OF THE SPEAKING SUBJECT

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*This text accompanies Qui parle ? / Who Speaks?**Curated by Katrie Chagnon**Montreal: Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery (2018)**March 7 – April 21, 2018*

A collection of artworks, like an exhibition, is made up of a tangle of voices whose identity, status, authority and enunciative modalities often remain ambiguous, and sometimes hidden. In the framework of this presentation of the Gallery's most recent acquisitions, asking the pointed question *who speaks?* doesn't, however, aim to brush aside these fundamental ambiguities. Nor does it seek to divulge or render completely transparent a decision-making process that, regulated as it is by strict institutional policies and the ethical standards proper to a museum, must remain largely confidential.¹ In adopting a resolutely interrogative approach, I hope to diligently examine the question of the *speaking subject* — a question that, following the acquisition process, turned out to be inherent to all the works selected. I believe this type of examination compels us to reconsider the very discourses that justify the presence of such works within the institution, while at the same time allowing for different readings of the issues raised by the cohabitation of these works within the exhibition's physical and discursive spaces.

As the bilingual repetition of the title suggests, the question *who speaks?* can itself be understood in many ways, and resonate differently in the two languages, according to the underlying theoretical or critical issues of the context in which it is posed. The authorship and discursivity of the contemporary artist are at the centre of these issues. Directly referencing structuralist critique (Barthian and Foucauldian) of the concept of

the Authorⁱⁱ (and by extension, that of the Artist), *who speaks?* raises the problem of the undecidable and multiple origin of all utterances inscribed in the organized field of language, a field which, to quote Jacques Derrida, is not one “that [can only] be described by certain theories of the psyche or of linguistic fact. It is first [...] the cultural field from which I must draw my words and my syntax, the historical field which I must read by writing on it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Many of the works brought together in this exhibition play with the undecidable nature of the speaking/writing/reading subject, while at the same time questioning the sociocultural parameters within which artistic discourses take shape, function and circulate. The title itself of Raymond Boisjoly’s wall installation *Author’s Preface* (2015) already problematizes the artist’s authorial intentionality by situating this central statement within the paratext of the piece, transforming the often secondary didactic language surrounding the artwork into its primary subject matter. As Boisjoly explains, the project stems from “an interest in administrative writing as a literary genre”^{iv}, which is to say, that type of writing necessitated by grant-writing, a practice that inevitably informs the way artists speak about their own work. Made up of cryptic phrases and floating statements without any obvious speaker — “ALWAYS ANOTHER MANNER OF SPEAKING”, “ACTION UNDERTAKEN AND DOCUMENTED”, “PLANS FOR OTHER SCHEMES AND OTHER PLOYS”, “THE POSSIBILITY OF WORKING THROUGH”, “OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO OUR INTENTIONS” —, to name but a few, Boisjoly’s “author’s preface” echoes that of the book written by filmmaker Maya Deren in parallel with her film *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*^v, from which Boisjoly also draws his source imagery. In Deren’s text, she particularly insists on how her contact with Haitian Vodou culture led her to abandon her initial artistic intentions and pretenses in order to favour a more conscientious documentary approach, in line with the reality that she had taken on the goal of representing.^{vi} Besides underlining the ethical and political issues inherent to neutralizing the authority of the artist, and confronted with the problem of not only *who* is speaking, but also from *where* they speak, for *whom* and *why*, Deren’s narrative, rearticulated by Boisjoly, makes manifest the contingent and variable nature of all

enunciative positions. In so doing, Deren and Boisjoly highlight the invariably specific circumstances that condition both discursive acts and their reception.

When the figure of the artist sheds the cloaks of authenticity, originality and individual expression, it can be redefined in performative and intersubjective terms, as a network of subjectivities in constant transformation. The statements that Suzy Lake placed at the bottom of the four photographs of the series *On Stage* (1974/2013) are in line with this thinking. For example, under one of the images, where Lake is depicted taking on a model's pose, we read: "ROLE-PLAYING IS A DAILY OCCURRENCE: IT CAN BE AS SUBTLE AS DRESSING FOR A SPECIAL OCCASION, DIPLOMACY, OR INADVERTANTLY [*sic*] PICKING-UP SOMEONE'S." This statement is representative of the feminist approach developed by Lake in the early 1970s, also evident in the maquette version of one work from the *Transformation* series recently acquired by the Gallery (*Maquette: Suzy Lake as Françoise Sullivan*, 1974/2012). By the same token, it highlights the fluid nature of identity — in this case, her identity as a woman —, as well as its porosity, particularly in regards to the fundamental role of the Other in the formation of the self. In this sense, Lake's practice is closely aligned with Judith Butler's idea that the very possibility of speaking as an "I" hinges on an awareness of external factors that inevitably limit self-knowledge, thus drawing it into structures of address based in intersubjectivity.^{vii}

As a matter of fact, the voice-over that greets us in the exhibition space speaks in the second person rather than the first. The monotone narration of the video piece *Mount Rundle* (2014), performed by Montréal artist Jo-Anne Balcaen, simultaneously affirms and erases the artist's presence. Delivered in the solitude of a pair of headphones, the voice comes across as an appeal addressed to an Other, and as internalized reverberations of a cultural superego with a penchant for blaming and criticism. By way of a seemingly anecdotal autobiographical account, *Mount Rundle's* narrative recounts with irony the psychological mechanisms of projection and introjection, as well as of alienation typically hindering interpersonal relationships within the art world. Balcaen also draws attention to the verbosity so present in this ecosystem, as exemplified by the

overdetermined use of certain words by artists in order to socially perform their own artistic individuality^{viii}—in a sense, creating a parallel with Boisjoly’s reflections on bureaucratic discursivity.

The cross-sectional questions raised in this exhibition lead us naturally into psychoanalytic theory and practice, one of whose cornerstones is the fact that the “ego” of the subject never corresponds exactly with the presence that speaks to you.^{ix} It is this disconnect — for Lacan, one that is inherent to the speaking subject — that Moyra Davey explores in her video piece *Fifty Minutes* (2006). Presented as a “work of autofiction”, and taking the standard psychoanalytic session of fifty minutes as its model, this video depicts the artist confiding to the camera in an ambivalent position that is not entirely that of the analysand, but that clearly evokes it, particularly through the nature of her reflections and the mode of address she employs. The oddly disincarnate tone of her voice, along with its peculiar flow, pauses and hesitations, reinforce the distancing set up by the recitative method that Davey uses. While listening to her, we are constantly compelled to reference the accompanying text written prior to the shoot, where she intermingles intimate disclosures about her refrigerator, psychoanalyst and pregnancy, among other things, with citations from various texts she is reading. Finding herself unable to carry out her work on the couch, which is to say, effectively communicate to Dr. Y. an “unfiltered version” of her life, Davey foregrounds a constituent condition of her own subjectivity, one that aligns with what Kaja Silverman calls “the author as receiver”^x—the state wherein the texts of other authors enter into the reader.^{xi}

With *,000*, (2016), Isabelle Pauwels foregrounds a completely different set of psychoanalytical issues connected to the libidinal economy of communication. In this intentionally difficult work, that certain people (particularly those identifying as women) might find alienating or even distressing, Pauwels makes parallels between verbal exchange and sexual dynamics, human interaction and consumerism, artistic expression and pornography. Taking the form of a “quasi-schizophrenic conversation”^{xii}

in contrast with the monologues of Balcaen and Davey, Pauwels makes audible, and partially readable, the field of conflictual forces, effects and desires within which the artist's voice is spoken. In ,000, this voice is embodied by an actress/dominatrix who attempts to carve out her own space among several primarily masculine interlocutors, whose replies combine advertising catchphrases, fetishistic fantasies, insults, financial negotiations, various trivia, and requests to be sexually or racially humiliated, among other things. The great number of voices present in ,000, highlights the unequal relationships that determine the use of language in different contexts, while at the same time articulating the ultimately commercial nature of these interactions. In the exhibition, the chatter that makes up the soundtrack to this piece dialogues with the formatted mass media language explored by Ian Wallace's *Magazine Piece* (1970-), a language spoken by subjects paradoxically rendered almost invisible and anonymous by the very conditions of expression privileged by mass-circulation magazines, despite the over-representation of these publications in social space.

The act of speaking and making room for speech—voicing and giving voice—eventually makes for an exercise of power that fundamentally politicizes the discursive field. As Linda Alcoff fittingly notes in her article “The Problem of Speaking for Others”, “Rituals of speaking are politically constituted by power relations of domination, exploitation, and subordination. Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act of political struggle. Simply put, the discursive context is a political arena.”^{xiii} This observation is echoed in contemporary discussions around self-determination and representation of Indigenous subjectivities, questions that underpin the inclusion of Krista Belle Stewart's *Seraphine, Seraphine* (2014) in the collection. Stewart's artwork is interesting for the ambiguity of its discursive politics, giving voice as it does to the same person (Seraphine Ned Stewart, the artist's mother) in two different videos filmed fifty years apart, in different situations and using different methods, docudrama in the first case, testimonial in the second.^{xiv} By transforming the exhibition space into a place where voices previously excluded from it can now be heard, *Seraphine, Seraphine*

offers the viewer the opportunity to occupy a new position of receptivity and active listening.

In this sense, *Qui parle? / Who Speaks?* is a question asked both to artists whose works have been acquired and exhibited by the Gallery, and to the Gallery itself, including the individuals who, expressing themselves through this institution, construct, legitimize and attribute value to artistic discourses. By pursuing the reflexive work undertaken in previous exhibitions of artworks from the collection, this presentation of new acquisitions focused on the idea of the speaking subject represents an opportunity for us at the Gallery to examine our own ways of working, and to pose certain questions: Who does the Gallery's collection and programming give voice to? According to what modes and procedures? Why are these particular voices represented, rather than others? What does this imply? These underlying questions are broached throughout the exhibition, by way of curatorial strategies and public programs that express and subtly shift the authority of certain discourses, including my own as curator of the collection and this exhibition, and those of the gallery director, who has reoriented the acquisition policies of the Gallery since her arrival in 2003.^{xv} The inclusion of texts and documents in part from acquisition files, the delegation of two iterations of Ian Wallace's *Magazine Piece* to the curatorial intern Chris Gismondi, and the different responses to the work by Chris and Public Programs and Education Coordinator Robin Simpson, all help create a space of critical reflection where diverse voices are able to form relationships, speaking within, through, with, around and even against the works assembled here.

Translated from the French by Simon Brown

NOTES

ⁱ During the development of this project, the question came up of whether or not we should make public a transcript or audio recording of the acquisitions committee meeting, and integrate it into the exhibition. I discussed this possibility at length with the director and committee members, and many problems potentially created by such an approach were identified. We thus ended up abandoning the idea.

ⁱⁱ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” (1968), in *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 142-148; Michel Foucault, “What is an Author” (1969), in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology* (New York: New Press, 1998), 205-222.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jacques Derrida, “La parole soufflée”, in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978), 224.

^{iv} The artist’s words, from email discussions with the gallery owner Catriona Jeffries, during the acquisition of the work.

^v Posthumously released in 1985, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* is a black-and-white documentary on Vodou religion as it is practised in Haiti. The film was created from scenes Deren had filmed in Haiti between 1947 and 1954, and was completed years after her death by her third husband Teiji Ito and his partner at the time Cheryl Winett Ito.

^{vi} Deren writes: “I had begun as an artist, as one who would manipulate the elements of a reality into a work of art in the image of my own creative integrity; I end by recording, as humbly and accurately as I can, the logic of a reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity, and to abandon my manipulations.” Maya Deren, “Author’s Preface”, in *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, New York, McPherson & Company, 1983 [1953], 6.

^{vii} Judith Butler, “Giving an account of Oneself”, in *Diacritics*, vol. 31, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 22-40.

^{viii} Cf. Pablo Helguera, *Art Scenes: The Social Scripts of the Art World* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2012).

^{ix} I am paraphrasing here Jacques Lacan’s lecture “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” (Delivered at the Rome Congress, September 1953), in *Écrits* (New York: Norton & Co., 1996), 197.

^x Kaja Silverman, “The Author as Receiver”, *October*, vol. 96 (Spring 2001), p. 17-34, cited in George Baker, “The Absent Photograph”, in *Moyra Davey : Speaker/Receiver* (Berlin, Sternberg Press ; Basel, Kunsthalle Basel, 2010), 93.

^{xi} On the theme of reading in Davey’s work, see Moyra Davey, JoAnn Verbug and James Welling, *The Problem of Reading* (N.p.: Documents book, 2003).

^{xii} This expression is borrowed from Édith Brunette, who uses it to describe ,000, in her review of the exhibition – *I’d rather something ambiguous. Mais précis à la fois.* (Nov. 12 – Dec. 16, 2016), where this work was presented for the first time at the Gallery, prior to its acquisition. Edith Brunette, “Je préférerais (éclipses)”, *PDF #4* (June 2017): 147.

^{xiii} Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others”, *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (Winter 1991-1992): 15.

^{xiv} The first video consists of a black and white docudrama entitled *Seraphine: Her Own Story Told by Seraphine Ned*, realized by Richard Bocking in 1967 for CBC’s Camera West program. The film is made up of reenactments from the period of Seraphine’s life when she was studying nursing in Vancouver. The second video is a recording of her testimony at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings held in Vancouver in 2013.

^{xv} Upon her arrival at the Ellen Gallery, Michèle Thériault placed a moratorium on new acquisitions that lasted until 2011. This decision was based on a lack of human resources and space for the collection, and allowed for a thorough re-evaluation of the collection practices hitherto used, the development of curatorial projects that might critique these practices, and a rewriting of acquisition policies more in line

with the Gallery's programming orientation under Thériault's directorship. This policy, which specifies the selection criteria of new acquisitions, among other things, is part of the documents presented in the exhibition, and can be consulted on-line at:

<http://www.concordia.ca/content/dam/common/docs/policies/official-policies/VPRGS-11.pdf>