

THE EPHEMERAL AS AN AGENT OF REFLEXIVE INQUIRY

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When one looks up what the word ephemeral *doesn't* mean or suggests – its negative face, so to speak – a few of the terms that come up are the following: definitive, durable, eternal, immortal, interminable, permanent, perpetual or stable. Even though durable evokes progressiveness because of its ecological inflections today, none of these terms, in relation to contemporary art production, curatorial practice and their relationship with the environment of the gallery are particularly desirable when envisaging a critical and reflexive practice.

What defines the *ephemeral* – that is, what has a status of limited temporality or an undetermined one; what is disappearing, has disappeared or will disappear or what is lost – can be made to inflect one's frame of reference and also be used as a tool to help one articulate such a reflexive practice.

As the director of, and a curator in an institutional site – a university art gallery – an exhibition environment that is of the white cube/black box type, the notion of the ephemeral may seem like an odd one to advocate and to adopt as a tool. What of these unmovable walls, what of this tightly configured and dedicated space for art, what of the trappings of years of conventions and what of its exhibition history? It is the coming up repeatedly *against* this specific, set configuration and structure by the considerations and effects of the ephemeral that can create a productive relationship. The friction that emerges out of this paradox allows one to think reflexively about a space, its relevance, its possibilities, its forms of display, and the workings and failures of the

exhibitionary and of the curatorial resulting, hopefully, in some kind of difference and critical discourse that goes beyond the instrumentalization of knowledge, ideas and art.

A number of curatorial contexts and display strategies at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery have allowed for productive interfaces with the ephemeral.

DOCUMENTARY PROTOCOLS

Documentary Protocols was produced by the Ellen Art Gallery between 2007 and 2010 and involved three parts: *Documentary Protocols I: Emulations of Administration in Artistic Practices of the 1960s and 1970s in Canada* (fall 2007), *Documentary Protocols II: Artists as Cultural Workers and Information Managers in Canada, 1967-1975* (spring 2008), and *Documentary Protocols 1967-1975*, a 400 page book with various essays examining the issues raised in the shows.¹

This complex project addressed a historical moment in Canada in which the investment of the concept of information by artists converged with the role of administrator they gave themselves. It looked at their practices, their relationship with governmental structures and social programs, and the role of self-managed organizations in society in relation with the political and utopic aims of the time.

The material constituting the entire project were documents – primarily administrative ones – drawn from 12 archival fonds across Canada, as well as documentary videos. However, the documents in question were not artists' ephemera as such but rather the fallout of various gestures, positions and acts taken by artists working as administrators. The undefined institutional status of much of the material created a tension within the framework of the exhibitionary apparatus in the Gallery and was problematized in the project. Furthermore, the very institutions that preserved these documents (particularly the National Gallery

of Canada) had difficulty categorizing this material and thus in establishing the protocols to manage their loan (could they be ascribed the surplus value of the art object?). One strategy to offset the aura given to these items, from their mandatory presentation in secure display cases, was to request their digitization in order to make them available to the public for direct manipulation. What did it mean for an institution to agree to lend archival documents for an exhibition and to receive a request to have the same documents in their digitized form available alongside the originals without any such restrictions? Their framing within the Ellen Gallery clearly raised questions about that very framework and what constitutes a *proper* subject for a contemporary art project.



View of Room B, *From Documentary Protocols II*. Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University. Photo: Paul Litherland.



View of Room B, *From Documentary Protocols II*. Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University. Photo: Paul Smith.



View of Room B, *From Documentary Protocols II*. Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University. Photo: Paul Smith.

Documentary Protocols II used processes that challenged the current practice of quick consumption of art in its various public manifestations. Extensive reading of a large, even excessive amount, of written material – exhibited to be *read*, and not gazed at – was required to experience the exhibition in its totality, thus making its consumption labour-intensive. As the critic Sven Lütticken suggests in his discussion of the strategies used by the collaborative duo Bik Van der Pol : “In an age when modernist contemplation is transformed in even a more questionable practice of quick consumption, books [or here written documents] can offer the reader/viewer more time and space for reflection and appropriation than the experience of viewing art.”²

Quantity was not used as a formal gesture, but as a means to reflect temporally upon the investment in the concept of information and the rise of the administrative ethos. Quantity rendered visible the rising tide of information and its circulation, as well as emphasized the complexity of the situation.

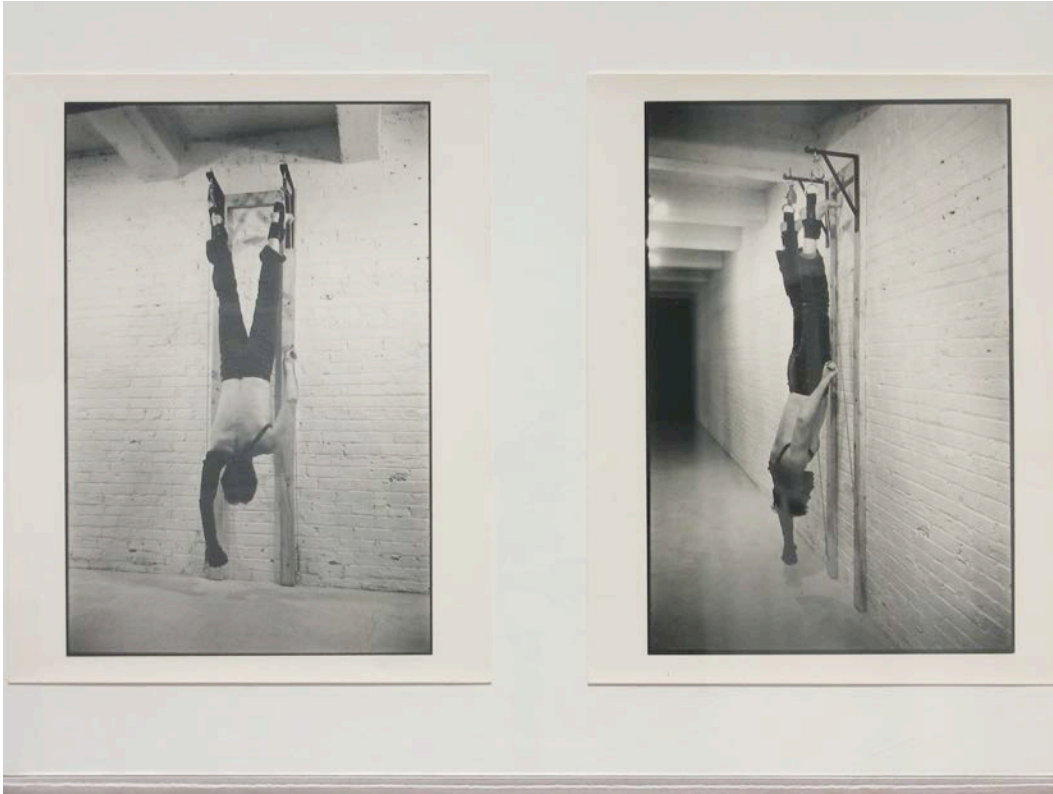
Documentary Protocols as an exhibition brings to the fore for the visitor “the potential and the limitations of the exhibition space as a representational medium”³ and its function as a producer of knowledge with historical considerations. The documents displayed *and* made available for manipulation by the public conveyed the textual, political and economic strategies of their time, while the strategies used to present them, worked to resist their objectification and to emphasize their banality. Working with *and* against the exhibition environment, this configuration of ephemera queried the role and limits of the contemporary art exhibiting environment today, as it challenged habitual visitor behaviour.

READING THE LIMITS

Tim Clark. Reading the Limits: Works 1975-2003, an exhibition project produced in 2008,⁴ brought to the fore the contribution of a very singular practice in performance and installation art in Montreal that had been somewhat ignored in the history of Canadian contemporary art, while addressing issues pertaining to the limits of art. The project also negotiated the challenge of framing works in the gallery that no longer existed: exhibiting the ephemeral.

In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s Tim Clark developed a form of performance-based practice significant for its engagement with ritualized violence enacted through intense readings of philosophical and ethical texts. The exhibition employed dynamic strategies to frame and present the ephemeral as represented in Clark's performance work of the past, for which only minimal documentation – sometimes only a photograph – remained. The challenge was how to resist the fetishization of these small but compelling photographs and allow them to be experienced as vectors to the past and the future simultaneously, and as an unfixed presence that could provoke a discussion in the here and now.⁵ One could consider how these documents impact the viewing space as elements that nourish a discursive consideration of the stances adopted, not only by Tim Clark *then*, but also *now*, by performance itself, and by the curator.

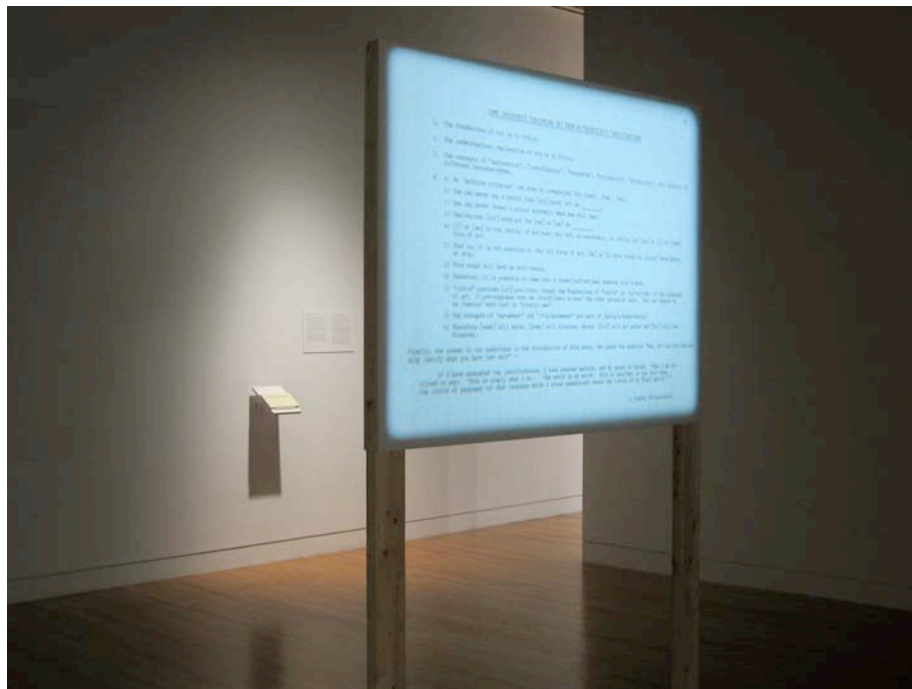
The context of the university art gallery as one that “emphasizes a culture of books, texts, knowledge and passive and active reading practices” was incorporated in the mode of presentation of the documents as they echoed the artist's own practice, thus reinforcing the presence of the academic context in the visitor's experience of the work.⁶



Tim Clark. *A Reading of the 23rd Psalm*, from *Tim Clark: Reading the Limits*. Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University. Photo: Paul Litherland.

Each documentary photograph was presented in the most simple manner, unframed and pinned behind a sheet of plexiglas, bracketed on the left by the identification of the work and the printed text that was *read* by Clark in the performance at the time. Pointedly, the identification and text were actual pages from the exhibition catalogue with its specific font and layout. Then, on the right of the photograph was a printed commentary by Tim Clark who revisited the performance and explained from the vantage point of today (2009 to be precise), the objective of the piece and various issues related to its production at the time. The temporal shift that occurred through the presentation apparatus – both a curatorial and artist intervention – transformed the photograph and entire ensemble into a kind of channel, making it available not just as a surface but as an arena of discussion in flux. This composition of catalogue pages + photograph + artist commentary gave to the viewer a multiple and layered experience that resulted in complex considerations in which were imbricated, all

at once, the past and the present, the writerly and the readerly, the philosophical, the status of the photograph and the text, and their functions as mediated by the curator, the gallery *and* the exhibition catalogue.



Tim Clark, Views of installation: *Some Thoughts on the Questions and Limits of Art*. Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University. Photograph: Paul Litherland.

A work by Clark titled *Some Thoughts on The Question of Limits in Art* (1979), a film-performance installation, was recreated. The resulting presentation was a hybrid, in that the recreation included an existing element (the film of the Wittgenstein text that remained) and re-enacted material (reproducing the content of a lost film of the artist performing the gesture of writing). On an adjoining wall photographs showing the original context were presented with the artist's description. This somewhat incongruous presentation, through its material presence, was devised to problematize the issue of recreation and re-enactment in its refusal to erase the ephemeral and lost condition of the initial installation.

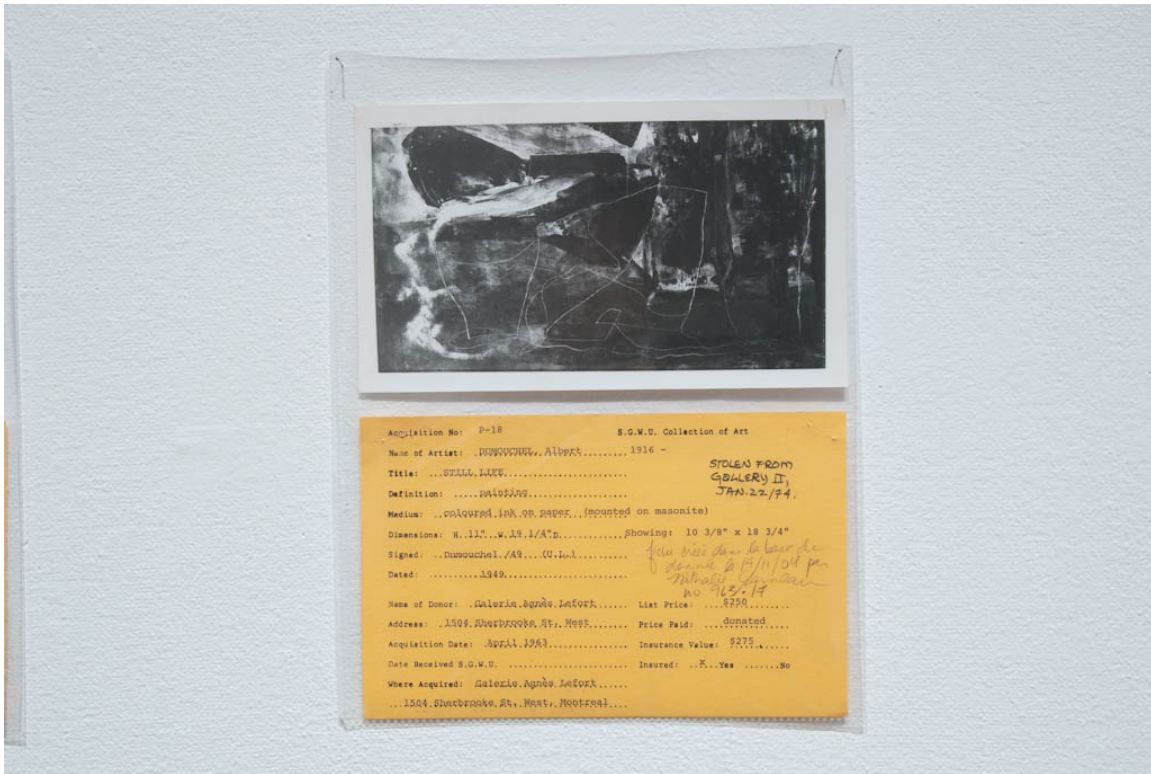
COLLECTING: THE INFLECTIONS OF A PRACTICE

Developed out of the Ellen gallery's permanent collection, *Collecting: The Inflections of a Practice*,⁷ presented in 2010, examined through a series of groupings of works, issues in collecting practices such as the ethics of provenance and acquisitions, effects of varying conservation practices, inconsistencies in documentation, and the status of lost or misplaced works. The latter category is of particular interest in the context of this discussion.

When one addresses the ephemeral, the notion of loss is often what is occluded or resisted and efforts are made to counter the loss by retrieving it, reconstructing it or by attempting other nostalgic returns to the original moment, whatever it may be. An impossible and unproductive endeavour. As discussed above in the *Reading the Limits* project, a richer forum for debate today is one that gives an equal status to the trace (the documentary photographs for instance) in the analysis of the lost performance; one that refuses the fetishization of absence.

In *The Inflection of a Practice* what is addressed are not works that have disappeared because that process is part of their inherent nature; it is rather stolen works, or “misplaced works” from an institution’s permanent collection. What is of interest is how one curates the *condition* and *status* of the lost work of art in a context that seeks to reflect on epistemological issues in relation to collecting and conserving. And, furthermore, how such loss figures within the exhibitionary function of the white cube, in which the blank space of the white expanse of the gallery is often itself at the service of the spectacle.





Collecting: The Inflections of a Practice 2010. View of “Lost or Misplaced Works” section. Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University. Photo Paul Litherland.

The available ephemera consisting of administrative documents – small, mostly black and white photographs, cursory information on index cards and security reports – were exhibited in plastic sleeves pinned in a line on the wall. They appear as poor and inadequate substitutes that seem to negate their possible role as surrogates. What is made visible is the loss itself (in the starkness and poverty of what is being offered to the eye), which is being given equal status as the real art object. The mode of display used, however, is antithetical to the discourse that valorizes the eternal value of the art object. It has the effect of bringing to the foreground the hidden conditions and circumstances of collection and conservation activities, and the discourse on value in an institutional context, opening up the exhibition and the artwork to querying its own limits and status.

Both criticality and reflexivity have been absorbed by the international art market and as Lütticken states “have become unique selling points “ in the

culture industry.⁸ These terms seem ineffective, worn and a pale reflection of the possibilities they offered. How can what they represent and be rehabilitated through curatorial activity? How can they be infused with relevance today and enable a reconsideration of the artistic complex? There is no simple answer. But here and there, focused attempts are made to engage in such reconsiderations in relation to precise contexts such as the one that is this university art gallery. Working through the “ephemeral” as a tool for investigation of the very terms that constitute it in the projects discussed above, has allowed for a partial but productive reflection on curatorial activity and modes of display and their ability to transform context, reception, the definition of the artwork into areas of inquiry.

NOTES

1. *Documentary Protocols I* was presented at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery from August 30 to October 6, 2007; *Documentary Protocols II* from May 3 to June 14, 2008. The publication *Documentary Protocols 1967-1975* was launched in February 2010.

2. Sven Lütticken, “Bik Van der Pol’s Repetition,” in *Secret Publicity, Essays on Contemporary Art* (NAi Publishers: Rotterdam), 159.

3. *Ibid.*, 156

4. The project was conceived by the artist, theorist and anthropologist David Tomas and developed by Eduardo Ralickas and Michèle Thériault. It was presented at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery from October 23 to November 29, 2008.

5. These performance-related documents are not just secondary documents *after* the “original” performance. They exist in each other’s orbit, so to speak, and generate each other’s existence. Their status alongside the original has been advocated and discussed by theorists and historians (such as Amelia Jones, Kathy O’Dell, Philip Auslander, Barbara Clausen and Anne Bénichou).

6. For a more detailed discussion see David Tomas, “Animating the Document, Performing the Spectator: Tim Clark, Reading the Limits”, *Ciel Variable* 86 (September – December 2010): 15.

7. The exhibition was curated by Mélanie Rainville and presented at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery from January 9 - February 10, 2010.

8. Lütticken, *op. cit.*, 7.