

INTERACTIONS

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John Massey. From *Interactions*, Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University. Photo: Paul Litherland.

Controversies in the art world regularly make a splash in the media. *Voice of Fire* (1967), created by the American painter Barnett Newman and purchased by the National Gallery of Canada in 1989 for \$1.8 million, is emblematic of this type of debate. The acquisition raised a number of political questions in the art world and was the subject of much commentary in the media. The installation *Vanitas: Flesh Dress of an Albino Anorexic* (1987), created by Jana Sterbak and presented at the National Gallery of Canada in 1990, also provoked a memorable

controversy by raising a number of ethical questions that largely transcended the context of its exhibition. These two events led a number of media personalities to discuss economic, political, and ethical issues linked to art, but they also brought to the forefront the essential question of the role of art in society. Today, Quebec's policy of integration of arts with architecture (*Politique d'intégration des arts à l'architecture*, known as the 1 Percent Act) regulates the funding and installation of artworks in government buildings, cities allocate key spaces within their jurisdictions for artworks, and strategies are used to present artworks outside of conventional exhibition venues. Yet, the presence of art in the public space does not lessen the gap between art and the public. This gap, which is tied to different social, ethical, political, and economic questions, testifies to fundamental differences in the ways in which we relate to art. Arising both from the artworks themselves and from the experience they offer to the public, this gap can thus be explored within the space in which the works are exhibited, namely the art gallery.

Dialogic and Participatory Methodology

Interactions develops in the space of the gallery a discussion on the reception and interpretation of contemporary art. This exhibition, organized using a dialogic and participatory methodology, involves encounters between individuals and artworks, and between participants and the curator, with the purpose of examining different relationships with art. I chose to instigate encounters and make them available to the public by inviting thirty individuals, from different milieus and with various levels of knowledge or appreciation of art, to interact with an artwork I selected for them. Some, namely the artists, art historians and theoreticians, mediators, and exhibition curators, are specialists of the visual arts, whereas others—librarian, social worker, naturopath, teacher, student, journalist, theatre director, sociologist, executive assistant—have other types of knowledge. I asked them to interpret the selected artwork by answering four questions. Some

responded verbally and were recorded on video, whereas others wrote a commentary. The result is a group of documents comprising videos and texts presented in the exhibition, in proximity to the respective artworks. This mode of presentation, alongside the works of art, raises the question of their status in the viewer's experience.

Artworks

The works chosen for *Interactions* are contemporary with regard to both the questions they raise and the means used by the artists to address those questions. They offer a thought-provoking aesthetic experience.

Alana Riley's video *You are the Work* (2011) welcomes visitors to the exhibition in the Gallery's entrance. This artwork, which presents individuals filmed frontally as they watch a video by John Baldessari, immediately introduces us to the subject being addressed in the exhibition: the relationship between the public and artworks. *Artist as Combustible* (1986), a photograph by Jana Sterbak of a performance, presents the nude artist with a flaming metal dome placed on her head. It is hung beside the exhibition's introductory text. In their iconography and strategic placement these works polarize the relationship examined in the exhibition. Riley's work represents the public's share and Sterbak's work, the artist's share. It is a juxtaposition that suggests, conceptually and indirectly, the division or gap between the public and contemporary art as it has often arisen through the history of art and more recently in controversies discussed in the media. The pairing of these two artworks also evokes the dialogic methodology upon which the exhibition is based.

Moving beyond these two introductory pieces, *Interactions* presents works by Bertille Bak, Olivia Boudreau, Louis-Philippe Côté, Rachel Echenberg, Erin Gee, Nelson Henricks, John Massey, Thérèse Mastroiacovo, Sharif Waked, and Hong-Kai Wang that offer different types of connection with knowledge, cognition, perception, emotions, temporality, the senses, language, politics, and so on. The

artworks offer polysemous content that the contributors may approach through different points of view. Waked's video installation *To be Continued...* (2009), for example, features the actor Saleh Bakri reading an excerpt from *The Thousand and One Nights* in a setting that evokes videos produced by suicide bombers (to leave a final testimony for posterity) before they carry out an operation. This artwork may be situated in relation to the history of video art and notions of temporality and narrative, or considered in the context of Arabic literary culture or again in the context of tensions in the Middle East or between Western and Arab cultures.

Participants

The thirty contributors invited to participate in the project were selected according to various criteria. Beyond considerations concerning representation of gender, language, and age group, I wanted them to have different areas of knowledge.

I used my personal interpretation of the artworks—what I understood and retained—to select contributors who were likely to examine specific aspects of their form or content. I associated an artwork with an art professional, an individual with a knowledge base related to a secondary aspect of the artwork, and an individual, chosen more arbitrarily, from a completely different field. The process was highly intuitive. I assigned individuals to an artwork, based on my perception of a certain correspondence between their interests or personality and the form or content of the respective artwork. The relationship was sometimes tenuous, sometimes obvious.

Some contributors expressed themselves in writing and others in an interview recorded on video, since I wanted to work with these two modes of mediation: the written word and direct speech. These two formats lead to

different ways of formulating and expressing thoughts and diversifies the commentaries gathered.

Artwork + participant = response + interpretation

The dialogic methodology used to develop *Interactions* thus involved the presentation of ten contemporary works to thirty participants—three participants addressed one work, two by way of a video interview and one by way of a text—in order to foster a relationship and elicit from them a commentary on the artwork. The participants were required to come to a meeting, during which they had their first contact with the work assigned to them, temporarily installed in a room for that purpose. I *experienced* the works with them and noted their reactions, questions, and specific approach: asking to be alone with the work and then sketching it in order to keep it in mind and reflect on it, seeing a work more than once in order to experience it from different points of view in the space or to review certain elements of its composition, spending more time with photographic reproductions of a work than with the work itself, discussing or requesting documents about the works, biographical information or taking notes, and so on.

Following this first meeting, I sent them four questions in order to guide their thinking. In this context, the questions asked became significant. I wanted all the participants to answer the same questions in order to uncover what may remain constant in an encounter with a work they had not chosen themselves. The questions were simple and open-ended. I asked them to briefly describe the work, mention the aspect that struck them the most, communicate what the work meant to them, and whether or not the delay between their initial contact with the work and the moment when they discussed it had changed their relationship to it.

The ten participants who had to write a text used the questions as guidelines, but I gave them no other direction with regard to the content of their

text. The twenty participants selected for a video interview were asked to a second meeting, where they had to answer the four questions in front of a camera. They had to avoid stating whether or not they liked the work they were addressing. The session became a time to reflect on their relationship with art within the context of their concrete experience of one artwork.

Exposition

The thirty participants' comments, displayed near the artworks in question, gain a status analogous to that of the artworks themselves. The presentation of the video interviews on flat screens attached to the walls—a common practice in contemporary art exhibitions—tends to put their secondary status into question. The participants' texts, mounted on board and installed on the wall to the right of the screens, seems to replace the wall label that generally identifies an artwork and represents, in a way, its explanatory voice. Thus, the participants' video interviews and texts play a role that encroaches upon that of the exhibition curator or educator in a gallery.

Interactions encourages an exchange of ideas on several levels: between the participants and the curator, between the participants and the works, between the groupings of participants and the visitors to the Gallery. This project exposes its own process of production and of mediation, since it asks visitors to consider how each work is perceived and received. Moreover, it makes the visitor aware of his or her own response and interpretation of these artworks.

Contemporary Art in Society

Interactions sheds light on a question that is rarely debated without the pretext of controversies, often provoked by the media. Art-related controversies are sometimes triggered by unique events in the art world, such as the acquisition of

an expensive artwork or the exhibition of a work that raises ethical questions. More often, they are linked to the presence of artworks in the public space.

This exhibition is presented in a venue associated with contemporary art and not in the public space, although the Gallery is accessible to all. It therefore tends to speak more to the Gallery's regular visitors than to individuals who question the legitimacy of contemporary art and who, in the end, should give close consideration to the issues raised by the project.. What can individuals who already recognize the value and function of art in society draw from this exhibition? This project may help to further their thinking, but it would no doubt benefit from expanding beyond the art milieu to become the subject of a broader public debate. How do we define art and culture, and what position would we like to grant them in society? This question has great currency in today's socio-cultural and political arenas.

Translated from French by Käthe Roth