

Créer à rebours vers l'exposition: An Overview

By Marie J. Jean



View of the exhibition "Créer à rebours vers l'exposition": *The case of Périphéries*, VOX, centre de l'image contemporaine. Photo: Michel Brunelle.

Créer à rebours vers l'exposition is a research project on the history and future of exhibitions as well as their documentation in Quebec that took place at VOX centre de l'image contemporaine in Montréal between 2016 and 2019. The project focused on reactivations of seven exhibitions, all notable, albeit occasionally given short shrift in art histories¹: the Second Automatist Exhibition (1947), the Mousseau-Riopelle exhibition at Muriel Guilbault's (1947), *Montreal, Plus or Minus?* (1972), *Périphéries* (1974), *03 23 03—First International Encounter on Contemporary Art in Montreal* (1977), *Aurora Borealis* (1985), and *Chambres avec vues* (1999). While it is true that *Créer à rebours vers l'exposition* aimed to constitute often non-existent archives for the cases studied, their reactivations differed considerably in their approaches, taking the form of a theatre stage, an installation, a catalogue page layout, a large lightbox, a period room, and a performative reactivation, all with the goal of creating specific documentary experiences that aimed to be both dynamic and insightful. Exhibition views were an invaluable part of the project, and served to pose a number of interrelated questions. What is their use in the research, practice and history of exhibitions? When did they first appear in publications? How do they serve artists' self-critical reflections? And how is this documentary material used today to establish historical and narrative relationships in a given exhibition? This text provides an overview of the research project.

The Exhibition, An Ephemeral Practice

In 1983, Rober Racine wrote: "In conceptualizing and presenting an installation, the artist becomes involved in a most curious phenomenon: they agree to be included in an imaginary history of art. Not the history of Malraux's musée imaginaire, but one using their own works, which, unfortunately for them, become truly imaginary."² That history, he argued, consists in comments on the works that are potentially forever subject to re-actualization through critical discourse based on their documentation. For these works, in the form of ephemeral exhibitions, will eventually become no more than vague memories serving as demonstrations of that discourse. Thus, Racine notes with regret, the works are reduced to publicly performing their own disappearance, because all that will subsist are the images, words and recollections of what they were when initially shown. Racine's analysis, which appeared in *Parachute* concurrently with the *Aurora Borealis* event, is applicable to exhibitions as well as installations, which are both circumscribed by the ephemeral temporality of an event.³

Indeed, creating an exhibition requires installing works specifically in one location and submitting them to the temporal regime of the institution; that is, they are generally displayed for a fixed period. Besides that temporary public existence, subjecting works to successive actualizations requires their reactivation, with new variables incorporated each time. Donald Judd also expressed resistance to this process. Writing in 1982, he argued that certain exhibitions should be permanently maintained: "A good installation

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OF ARTISTS

is too much work and too expensive, and if the artist does it, too personal to then destroy. Paintings, sculptures, and other three-dimensional work cannot withstand the constant installation and removal and shipping.” He continued: “In 1966, one hundred and twenty paintings by Reinhardt were shown at the Jewish Museum for longer than usual. These probably will never be assembled again and if assembled will not be the same, since almost all has been damaged and extensively restored. In 1966, these paintings should have been hung and never moved.”⁴ Imagine if from now on, museums were to conserve not only works, but their exhibitions, so as to preserve the views originally devised by the artists. This radical stance is, of course, utopian, although it encompasses an issue that goes beyond the mere logistical questions evoked by Judd: in addition to their works, artists also produce exhibitions and, by extension, are continually engaged in re-exhibition. That said, we cannot help but hear nostalgia in Racine’s and Judd’s writings, since both manifest the desire to preserve original events for all time. As Svetlana Boym reminds us, nostalgia speaks to us from a place of implacable ambivalence: “[. . .] it is about the repetition of the unrepeatable, materialization of the immaterial.”⁵ We cannot re-exhibit the context in which the exhibition occurred, but we can include traces of what it was and what it becomes. Thus, to avoid ascribing cult status to the original events, or simply to rethink the past in new formats, it is useful to study the temporality that the reactivation of exhibitions allows us to experience.

The Historical Future of Exhibitions

Reactivations of exhibitions, which originally were exclusively concerned with productions of the modern avant-garde, have for the most part been pioneered by museums. Their aim is to preserve the historical authenticity of vanished works, to support art history research, and also sometimes to establish an aesthetic relationship with the emergence of contextually grounded practices. Reesa Greenberg has called this particular genre “remembering exhibitions,” in reference to exhibitional approaches that present themselves as the remembrance of exhibitions past.⁶ While the initial aim was to recreate historical accounts via literal reconstitutions, the practice grew more complex during the 1990s, when the goal became instead to foster critical reflection about the conceptual and historic framework that engendered the original exhibition. With this approach, artists engaged in the reconstitution of past exhibitions have employed far more daring methods, making use of institutional critique, revisiting the major narratives of art history and, especially, reorienting the visitor toward new and often unsettling aesthetic experiences.⁷ With this type of reconstitution, we may well wonder what it is exactly that is reactivated.

In 2013, a new type of exhibition re-enactment appeared, representing a veritable tour de force in material terms: the complete reconstitution, of which *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*, curated by Germano Celant in collaboration with Rem Koolhaas and Thomas Demand is exemplary. Visitors to the Fondazione Prada in Venice were teleported to Bern in 1969, to re-experience Process, Performance, *in situ*, Conceptual and Arte Povera works re-exhibited according to an installation schema meant to duplicate the initial exhibition as closely as possible. The reconstitution was an impressive feat because, contrary to the version devised by Jens Hoffman, it relied not on maquettes and documentation, but rather involved a painstaking, to-scale re-creation of the original show.⁸ While this architectural facsimile aimed to recreate the experience of both the Kunsthalle Bern and the works themselves, it nonetheless tended to be based on a conception of the past as something fixed to be exhumed from an overarching, dominant present. This approach asserted the superiority of “oldness” to the detriment of a history of becoming, a history open to a plurality of tellings. This conventionally historical position does afford circulation between present and past, but gives scant consideration to categories of the future. And yet, there is no already-realized history; only histories made and remade. How then are we to imagine a historical reconstitution enacted in hindsight, all while accounting for the continual reshaping of its history? One answer possibly lies in awakening art historians and exhibition curators from their dogmatic slumber. They seem to be complacent in the face of “the reassuring belief in some transparency of the real,”⁹ which reveals a fetishizing stance that, much like classic art history texts, studies the masterpiece while neglecting the broader context and less heroic narratives that actually constitute the raw material of that history. Reactivation of an exhibition should therefore be based on the actualization of the multiple narratives making up its history, rather than a mere remake of the original event.¹⁰ Anteriority is not necessarily authoritative, if we consider that the history of an exhibition is written with multiple narratives separating the original event from its various contemporaneities, based on an emplotment that fulfills itself over time.¹¹ History is thus constructed in hindsight; this is precisely the perspective from which we devised *Créer à rebours vers l’exposition*.

With the aim of making present this process of visualizing the past and, especially, the process of historicization whereby new narratives are continuously produced out of what such exhibitions become, a specific approach was chosen. We did not so much seek to “reconstitute” the seven exhibitions studied for *Créer à rebours vers l'exposition*; we “reactivated” them, attempting to uncover the significant moments that have marked their histories, from the time they were first displayed (without neglecting preliminary stages of research) up to the present day. The distinction is important, because to reconstitute means “to restore to its form, to its original state,” while our intention was more to retrace, to bring back into activity, and in turn exhibit what the exhibitions have produced, over time, in both documentary and discursive terms.¹²

Tracing The History of Exhibitions, One Document at a Time

Each of these reactivations thus relied on bringing past events into the present moment, based on documentary evidence that materializes various moments of their history. This included exhibition views (both photographic and videographic), correspondence, press clippings, audiovisual journals, publications, minutes of meetings, budgets, and other varied administrative documents, room plans, and comments (contemporaneous or not), combined with notes, conversations, citations, reactivations of performances, and present-day testimonials. To gather these documentary materials, exhaustive searches were conducted,¹³ given that, when it comes to the history of exhibitions, systematic archiving of data is an institutional practice that emerged rather late in Quebec, only in the mid-1980s. For this reason, production of new knowledge on the exhibitions studied often proceeded from simple clues found in the minutes of a meeting, or in exhibition views, which nonetheless provide the only evidence we might hope to use in locating an informative document. This arduous process was similar to the interpretive model of Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg,¹⁴ a proponent of microhistory, who uses the concepts of “traces” and “indiciary paradigms” to demonstrate that beyond the narrative core, “historical material indeed points toward a reality.”¹⁵ Methodologically, then, the idea was to retrace the thread of that reality by observing, as through a magnifying glass, how it had been constructed. Using the documents collated for each exhibition and the testimonials gathered, we gained a better understanding of the organizers’ intentions, the conceptual and exhibitional issues that determined them, and their reception by artists, audiences and other commentators over time. Thus it was based on factual materials that we mapped out augmented narratives around the construction of the history of these exhibitions.

In the case of *Créer à rebours vers l'exposition*, that history was constructed from exhibition views, mostly photographic, although we did also find filmed documents of the exhibitions, with sound.¹⁶ Present-day reconstitution of the narratives of these historical exhibitions, the arrangement of the works in space and their interactions, and the atmosphere of the venues, however, poses a challenge: how accessible is this visual documentation? These exhibition views were originally produced and distributed for documentary purposes, before becoming archives. It took decades for the views photographed by Maurice Perron to be deposited in the archives of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, even though they were reproduced many times after they were taken in 1947, beginning with the *Refus global* manifesto. No images of the exhibition *Périphéries* had been kept in the archives of the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, though some were found in press clippings. At the time, few institutions in Quebec showed any interest in exhibition views or maintained photographic archives. It was most often the artists themselves who documented exhibitions, to keep records of their contributions; journalists also produced such documentation to illustrate their reviews. And, occasionally, a newspaper or journal might hire a professional photographer to document an exhibition they were covering.

Likewise, it was not until the mid-1980s that exhibition views began to be included in catalogues. In this sense, it is often inappropriate to speak of an “exhibition” catalogue as such, since these publications generally deal with the works and comprise cropped images of them, without showing the display context. However, there are some fortunate exceptions; for example, in 1977, the catalogue of the *03 23 03—First International Encounter on Contemporary Art in Montreal* included views of performances, and the *Aurora Borealis* catalogue reproduced views of all of the installations shown. Indeed, the organizers of *Aurora Borealis* informed us that those views were included simply because the catalogue was published subsequently to the event, since funding was only confirmed afterward. As well, artist Pierre Dorion had commissioned a photographer to record views of his exhibition, which he then used as artistic material: one of the pieces in *Chambres avec vues*, exploiting a recursive *mise en abyme* effect, showed a view of the exhibition itself.

These circumstances proved beneficial because photographers, namely Pierre Boogaerts, Denis Farley and Richard-Max Tremblay, were then hired to produce true “photo reportages” of the events documented. This form of documentation, fragmentary in nature, involves cropping of space, establishment of perspective, and arrangement of the works within the frame, not to mention having to deal with mostly ambient and sometimes secondary lighting. Contrary to what one might imagine, such documentation is neither neutral nor objective; it relies on compositional strategies to better draw the viewer’s attention to certain details of the works or performances. Boogaerts in particular exploited contrasts in light levels to accentuate performance subjects during *03 23 03*. Farley documented each of the installations in *Aurora Borealis* in colour, also producing remarkable black & white views of the galleries in the shopping centre that evoke a tracking-shot effect, while in the process recreating the act of gazing around the exhibition. Tremblay used the ambient colours in the apartment where Dorion showed his series of pictures, capturing a wide range of tones that enhanced the painterly qualities of his images. Beyond the fact that this photographic documentation represents the essential material from which the history of exhibitions is written, further study of the practice and production of these documentary images remains to be done. In the meantime, one may well ask what all of these documents we retraced had to tell us.

When one examines the objectives that impelled art event organizers and exhibition curators, it is clear that the way exhibitions were ideated underwent fundamental transformations in the 20th century. The intent of the *Second Automatist Exhibition* (1947), organized by six artists, was to advance comprehensive research into a new art phenomenon that had yet to be named or classified into a movement.¹⁷ *Périphéries* (1974), organized by Alain Parent in collaboration with the artist-run centre Véhicule Art, presented post-Conceptual works by 17 Montreal artists for the first time at the Musée d’art contemporain. *Aurora Borealis* (1985), the first edition of the Cent jours d’art contemporain, organized by René Blouin, Claude Gosselin and Normand Thériault, featured some thirty installations by Canadian artists, the majority of which were designed especially for the occasion, to demonstrate the diversity of approaches to the practice. The organizers of these three events sought to explain to Montreal audiences how art production and practice were changing, at specific historical junctures.

Montreal, plus or minus? (1972), organized by Melvin Charney and presented at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts as well as in public spaces, had an entirely different aim: to cast a critical eye on political, urban-planning and architectural issues at play in the city in the early 1970s. Presenting it as an “exhibition-forum” involving engagement by artists as well as citizen voices, Charney put together a “polyphonic” exhibition that encouraged a plurality of perspectives, confrontations of ideas and creation of a critical space.¹⁸ Organized by France Morin, Chantal Pontbriand and Normand Thériault, *03 23 03 – First International Encounter on Contemporary Art in Montreal* (1977) included an exhibition of works by 342 international artists sent in by mail, a series of performances and a program of discussions. The event had two aims: to lay the foundations for international networking and encourage Montreal and its artists to be more open to the world, and view the exhibition as the place and time for encounters of diverse discourses and practices then emergent. Taking the form of “discursive events,” these two happenings drew attention to the relations among the “actors” in an exhibition—organizers, artists, works, texts, social context and media space—as a way of thinking about its inscription within a public space in which critical stances are negotiated.¹⁹

Chambres avec vues (1999), designed by Pierre Dorion, was a site-specific experimental project held in a vacant unit of a Montreal apartment complex, Les Dauphins sur le Parc. That exhibition saw the artist return to *in situ* installation practice, at the same time engaging in painterly exploration characterized by realism, in which a paring-down of detail and fragmentation of spaces created a schematic effect bordering on abstraction.²⁰ Likewise, Klaus Scherübel’s reactivation of two Automatist exhibitions—both of which were originally held in apartment spaces as well—took the form of art installations so as to offer an unsettling experience of a long-gone past. For the occasion, the artist reactivated two exhibition views by Maurice Perron, transposing them into the VOX gallery space and recreating the stages on which crucial events of modernist Quebec were played out. In that regard, one of the determining attributes of most of the exhibitions under study here is that they were presented in non-institutional spaces: an apartment, public spaces, a post office, shopping mall concourses, a residential complex. Contrary to what we might be led to believe, however, the majority of these initiatives resulted from voluntary choices since, in encouraging an exodus to different contexts, they gradually assimilated the site as an integral component of works and their exhibition, all while seeking to make art accessible to other audiences, targeted or otherwise. The other salient feature of these exhibitions is the fact that they

were often designed by artists, including Borduas and the Automatists, Charney, Dorion and Scherübel. And when they were organized by exhibition curators, the latter generally selected the artists, but left the choice of works and their arrangement in the space up to those artists. We must thus acknowledge that these exhibitions, with artists responsible for their design and staging, provided windows onto formal and conceptual mutations while offering artistic experimentation and aesthetic pleasure.

While their importance, including as regards the history of exhibitions in Quebec, has been well established, this has not been because they attracted large audiences or extensive media coverage. The Automatists' second exhibition took place in a private interior space, benefitted from very little dissemination outside the artists' inner circle, and was commented on by only two journalists (who, as it happened, were less than enthusiastic). Except for *Aurora Borealis* and *Montreal, plus or minus?* which as events were quite successful, these manifestations essentially had a limited audience of insiders. Thus, the reason why these exhibitions are so well regarded today is that they were relevant: they functioned as markers of change, in both artistic and social terms, over long periods and for large numbers of people. As a result, during all that time, they have continued to nurture the history, practice and future of art.

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1. Claudine Roger and Marie J. Jean were the curators of the reactivations, with the exception of the Automatist exhibitions and *Montreal, Plus or Minus?* The first was the work of Klaus Scherübel, and the second was conceptualized and produced under the direction of Marie Fraser and Anne-Sophie Miclo, and curated by Sarah Cousineau, Joséphine Rivard, Jade Seguela, Marie Tissot, and Camille Tremblay-Caron, and in collaboration with all of the students in the seminar "Exposition, interprétation et diffusion" offered at Université du Québec à Montréal as part of the joint museology master's program in 2018.

2. Racine's essay "Créer à rebours vers le récit," from which this quote is taken, inspired the title of this series of exhibitions. It was written in 1983 and published in abridged form four years later, in *Parachute*, Sept.-Oct.-Nov. 1987, pp. 33-35.

3. That said, history is seemingly at odds with Racine, given that artists and curators since, heaving to the constraints of conservation and commodification, have re-constituted and re-exhibited works that were initially shown as part of *Aurora Borealis*. Today, in hindsight, we can say that installations are re-installed, while exhibitions (and this is a recent phenomenon) are reactivated.

4. Donald Judd (1983). "On Installation," *Museums by Artists*. Toronto: Art Metropole, p. 198. This essay was originally published in 1982 under the title "The Importance of Permanence," in *Journal: A Contemporary Art Magazine*, pp. 18-21.

5. Svetlana Boym (2001). *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, p. XVII.

6. She also organizes them into a typology comprising of three categories: the "replica", partial and material, of an exhibition, with its celebration as the objective; the "riff", that is, a variation on or subversion of the original show involving "interplay between remembering and forgetting"; and the "reprise", in which the material experience of the original exhibition is recreated in a two-dimensional format, as a publication or a website. Reesa Greenberg (2009). "Remembering Exhibitions: From Point to

Line to Web," *Tate Papers*, No. 12 [online at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/remembering-exhibitions-from-point-to-line-to-web>].

7. The artists' approaches are daring because they shed the burden represented by the search for historical authenticity.

8. Hoffmann, for his part, reactivated this canonical exhibition in documentary form at the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts in 2012. It is interesting to note that Celant considered his reconstitution as a "ready-made", while Ippolito Pestellini Laparelli, the architect behind the reconstitution, viewed it as a theatre stage. In my opinion, this remake resembled, more than anything else, a monumental set that one might come across during the shooting of a historical film about this chapter of art history.

9. Nicole Loraux, quoted in François Dosse (2005). "De l'usage raisonné de l'anachronisme," *Espaces Temps*, No. 87-88, p. 26 [freely translated].

10. Thus, for example, following its initial presentation in Bern, *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* had toured in Germany and England, having been "reconstituted" at the Museum Haus Lange in Krefeld from May 9 to June 15, 1969, and then at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London from August 28 to September 27, 1969. It must be acknowledged that these re-exhibitions failed to arouse the same interest as the Bern event and met with rather lukewarm receptions from audiences, be they ever so knowledgeable. The London version's misfires were likely due to the transformation of the original concept, as well as the fact that many works were improperly installed, and it proved impossible to transport some emblematic pieces from Bern. This was because the English version was adapted by Charles Harrison, who, in response to a proposal by U.S. cigarette maker and exhibition sponsor Philip Morris, agreed to mount it on condition that he be allowed to add a contingent of British artists. Celant, however, excluded those chapters

from his historical reconstitution in Venice, even as part of the introductory documentary apparatus. Only a few of the publication's authors discussed this re-exhibition. See Barry Barker (2010). "When attitudes become form," *Flash Art*, No. 275 (Nov.-Dec.), p. 54.

11. Here I subscribe to the metahistorical approach developed by Reinhart Koselleck, who reconsiders the dialectics of the past and the future and their relationship in the present with the aim of rethinking the temporal structures of historical narrative. That is: "that covert connection of the bygone with the future whose relationship can be perceived only when one has learned to construct history from the modalities of memory and hope". This idea is the basis for the concept of history developed by Koselleck, which relies on two primary modes of subjectivation: the "space of experience" and the "horizon of expectation". These two categories allow consideration of the meanings inherent in the expectations of the historian directed toward the future and their interpretations oriented toward the past. Reinhart Koselleck (1990). *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 258-259.

12. Two research projects were the source of this approach and determined our methodology. See Marie J. Jean (dir.) (2018). *Serge Tournant. Exposés de recherche*. Montréal: VOX, centre de l'image contemporaine, 188 pages, and Marie J. Jean (dir.) (2013). *Room 901*. Montréal: Éditions du passage, 184 pages.

13. Sources included, notably, *Artex*, museums and other institutions, daily newspapers and magazines, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, CBC/Radio-Canada, the exhibition curators' own fonds, and especially the artists' own photographic archives.

14. Carlo Ginzburg (1980). "Signes, traces, pistes. Racines d'un paradigme de l'indice," *Le Débat*, Vol. 6, No. 6, pp. 3-44.

15. Nicolas Weill (2011). "Non l'histoire n'est pas une fiction," *Le Monde* [online at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2011/06/04/non-l-histoire-n-est-](https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2011/06/04/non-l-histoire-n-est)

[pas-qu-une-fiction_1531877_3260.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2011/06/04/non-l-histoire-n-est-pas-qu-une-fiction_1531877_3260.html); freely translated].

16. We presented unreleased films by Paul Gauvin documenting *Aurora Borealis* (in which the sound-based installations were also audible) and by Andrée Ménard on *Périphéries*, a Radio-Canada interview with Melvin Charney and report on *Montreal, Plus or Minus?*, and a video by Monique Moumblow about *Chambres avec vues*. In addition, the performances, lectures and public discussions accompanying *03 23 03* had been filmed by Irwin Schneider.

17. The exhibition video by Maurice Perron was given the title *la Seconde Exposition des automatistes* (the Second Automatist Exhibition) after the fact, as the group was first given that name, while the exhibition was ongoing, by the journalist and art critic Tancrede Marsil Jr. His article was entitled "Les Automatistes. L'école Borduas" and published in *Le Quartier latin*, the student newspaper of the Université de Montréal, on February 28, 1947 (p. 4).

18. The concept of "polyphony," which Bakhtin links to the modern novel, corresponds to a methodology often employed for so-called discursive exhibitions: a plurality of points of view, with discourses and ideologies contrasted without conclusion or summary. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, tr. and ed. C. Emerson, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

19. Exhibition historian Reesa Greenberg introduced the concept of "discursive event" in 1995, proposing a different "verbal model" of exhibitions that no longer referred to their textual and narrative content, but to the oral production that they encourage. Reesa Greenberg, "The Exhibition as Discursive Event," *Longing and Belonging: From the Faraway Nearby*, Site Santa Fe, 1995, pp. 118-125.

20. Dorion had previously done installations in the mid-1980s, including as part of *Aurora Borealis* (1985) and in apartments (Clark St., 1983, and Appart' art actuel, 1984).