

“Créer à rebours vers l’exposition”: The case of 03 23 03

Curators:
Marie J. Jean and Claudine Roger

With the collaboration
of Chantal Pontbriand and
Normand Thériault

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Klaus Rinke, performance, 1977. Credit: Pierre Boogaerts.

Continuing its research into the practice, history and future of exhibitions and their documentation, VOX presents the fifth in its series of documentary exhibitions, dedicated this time to the event *03 23 03 – First International Encounter on Contemporary Art in Montreal*. Organized by France Morin, Chantal Pontbriand and Normand Thériault and presented in a disused post office at 1306 Amherst St. from March 3 to 23, 1977, this art event included an exhibition, a program of performances, and a series of debates.

Though it has been rarely studied, this first encounter on contemporary art has particular historical significance, as its programming was both interdisciplinary and international. The organizers corresponded with several hundred artists in the Americas, Europe and Asia, inviting each of them to contribute projects to the exhibition that would be sent by mail. They also prepared an important line-up of performances and discussions (including Giuseppe Chiari, Raymond Gervais, Simone Forti and Charlemagne Palestine, General Idea, Klaus Rinke, Michael Snow, and Western Front), and devised a series of talks on the most innovative practices of the time (with guests including the likes of Jean-Christophe Ammann, Germano Celant, Annette Michelson, Caroline Tisdall). Through this ambitious program – coming in the wake of the controversies around nationalism sparked by *Québec 75* and the international networking efforts undertaken by *PARACHUTE*, the transdisciplinary magazine founded in 1975 – the organizers helped effect a major paradigm shift, whereby Montreal became more open to the world.

Seeking to observe the process of *03 23 03*'s historicization – to study the ways in which a historical narrative is shaped through traces left by the multiple reactivations of this type of art project – this exhibition comprises documentation of the 1977 event and its subsequent showing at the National Gallery of Canada (from May 5 to 25, 1977), a reprise of the performance by Simone Forti and Charlemagne Palestine, and a new musical performance by Michael Snow. The following conversation, in terms of its narrative mode, is in part a historical fiction assembled in the manner of an anachronic dialogue: past citations, drawn from the correspondence, the grant requests, the exhibition publication, and various comments are combined with notes recently written by Chantal Pontbriand, in response to our questions, and a discussion with Normand Thériault.

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■ FEBRUARY 2019

A COLLECTION
OF ESSAYS ON
THE PRACTICE
OF ARTISTS

Conversation

VOX: What was the context that led to the organization of 03 23 03 – First International Encounter on Contemporary Art in Montreal?

Chantal Pontbriand (2019)

In the spirit of the contemporary art magazine PARACHUTE, launched three years earlier in the fall of 1975 and which I led with France Morin [. . .], it was about opening up to the world, and the world opening up to us. There was a need to promote the flow of information, which was almost non-existent at the time, and to forge links between the international scene and Montréal. To create movement. It was a huge challenge, but the fact that PARACHUTE had had an international presence right from the start helped us a lot in terms of having the credibility, internationally, to put together the event.

Normand Thériault (1977)

The concept was simple: have the largest possible number of artists taking part in an international art gathering. To that end, we sent personal invitations to one in four artists listed in the *Art Diary* [1975], selected at random: that was our method of dividing up the artists and ensuring international representation, and 350 artists took part in the event. [. . .] There were also performances and talks accompanying the exhibition. All in an old, abandoned post office: we wanted the event to happen outside the “official” circuits.

France Morin, Chantal Pontbriand, Normand Thériault (1976)

Some remarks preliminary to the project: *01 21 11* will take place from November 1 to 21, 1976, at Média, 970 Rachel Street East, a venue that lends itself quite well to the type of event being planned: it is an open-plan space, in a central location, and well known, allowing for simultaneous presentation of an exhibition and events (“performances”), and that nevertheless can function as a work space for the entire process that, finally, will define *01 21 11*.

VOX: So, before the event was postponed to a later date, i.e., March 3 to 23, 1977, it was entitled 01 21 11 (1976) and from the start was a co-production of PARACHUTE and the Institut d’art contemporain. The magazine and its activities are well known: founded in 1975, PARACHUTE immediately designed a rigorous program that aimed to create a platform for exchanges of information between Canada and the international artworld. The magazine also initiated a novel critical vocabulary more representative of the new practices emerging from the fragmentation of art disciplines, while organizing various events designed to introduce those new practices to the public. By comparison, not much is known about the Institut d’art contemporain’s activities. What was the Institut?

Normand Thériault (2019)

The Institut was a not-for-profit organization that I founded, and which allowed me to produce various projects including, for example, the events *Québec 75* and *03 23 03*. The Institut was something that existed insofar as it produced events. It was a production structure, but was not an artist-run centre, and even less a museum-type “institution”.

VOX: The forms of art shown at the event were experimental, at once performative, process-based, and conceptual, as well as being rooted in disciplines as varied as visual arts, dance, film, and music. What factors determined the artistic orientations?

Normand Thériault (2019)

As part of a reflection on the evolution of art in Québec, “mail art” provided a way of associating conceptual art with various art forms. In allowing us to present a diversity of practices [Carl André, Monika Baumgartl, Louis Comtois, Pnina Gagnon, Peter Gnass, Tka Imura, Jarosław Kozłowski,

Giuseppe Penone, Roland Poulin, etc.], above all that component allowed us to underscore the existence of art networks.

Chantal Pontbriand (2019)

The practices were just as diverse in the “live” component of the event. The performances touched on various forms: visual, photographic, cinematic, textual, sound-based, musical, gestural, and danced. [. . .] No distinction of a disciplinary nature was made. And often, a single artist might borrow from a variety of forms, or else push one form to a paroxysm of intensities.

VOX: The photographic documentation of the event, before and during its presentation, was conducted entirely by Pierre Boogaerts, and is singularly exhaustive. The videographic documentation, by Irwin Schneider, is just as incredible. In addition, the catalogue published after the event opened has become a reference work. Why did you attach so much importance to documenting the event?

Chantal Pontbriand (2019)

The role played by the photographs, the book and the texts after the event had to contribute to channelling the experience that was 03 23 03, individually and collectively, in another way. Pierre Boogaerts, who conducted the photographic documentation (and then did the graphic design for the book) [. . .] was himself an artist and was doing conceptual and performative photography. He rose to the challenge of photographing everything that happened live during the event. In that role, he had to be sure of not missing anything, and his job was to “record” photographically so that everyone could access another type of experience in another time – that of the book and of posterity. Documentation is an experience in itself in the domain of photography. [. . .] You see things that you hadn’t observed in the present of the performance. It gives us a desire to see or to see again. It teaches us to see.

The book, published by PARACHUTE and *Médiart*, not only enabled people to see, understand and inform themselves about an art scene, about which information was lacking at the time; it also offered another experience than that of being present in that space. Everyone could now hold the event in their hands, allow their gaze to linger over it, go backward in time as they turned the pages, or move ahead of what was to come, at their leisure. The projects, entirely reproduced, could be seen in their entirety for the first time. And reading or visualizing could be done while adopting a different bodily and mental posture than that of the exhibition space. In that sense, the book delivered a further performative dimension [. . .].

Thierry de Duve (1977)

You’ve laid quite the challenge before me. Montréal and New York are already far behind, unfortunately, and here life has gone on, with its share of crap and good times, but especially all kinds of different work that has left me little time to my liking to work on the catalogue. [. . .] So here is what it contains: the categorized list of the 183 projects that I studied, arranged in order (which is important, because these “categories” are rather more like more arbitrary breakdowns in a continuum).

VOX: So Thierry de Duve attended the event, coming to Montréal at the urging of Chantal Pontbriand, who had met him in Paris in 1976, and it was as an exceptionally interested and motivated spectator that he offered to write what became the key text of the publication. As for *Médiart*, was that not a journal funded by the Université du Québec à Montréal? What was its role in 03 23 03?

Rose-Marie Arbour (2011)

Normand Thériault was the coordinator of the GRAA [Groupe de recherche en Administration de l’art at Université du Québec à Montréal, active from 1971 to 1973] and all its practical activities. [. . .] They fulfilled the group’s objective, which was to establish a link between theory and practice via the dissemination of art and the entire process including the relationship with the artists, showing the works, and so on. In 1972 and 1973, Normand had groups of students, around 15 to 18 [they included Chantal Pontbriand, Claude Gosselin, René Blouin and André Ménard, among others], and they founded the journal

Médiart [active from 1971 to 1973, before becoming a publishing structure managed by Normand]. In this way they were introduced to major exhibitions and to debates. Especially debates. [. . .]

VOX: What has changed in the way an exhibition is organized, between 1977 and today?

Chantal Pontbriand (2019)

I would say that *03 23 03* extended the notion of “exhibition” to that of event, incorporating a strong time-based dimension to a *dispositif* that, up to then, had been defined as a medium concerned essentially with the idea of space. The visual projects, in newsprint format, were replaced on the walls as they arrived by mail; the performances and live talks were experienced with both a temporal and a physical duration. The body came into play; presence, sensations, intensities were deployed.

Normand Thériault (2019)

At that time, we weren’t so much exhibition curators as event organizers. We discovered the practices as we went along, as if we were visiting an exhibition in another country. And we had made the decision to select the artists for the exhibition component using an arbitrary, rigorous rule (although there were a few exceptions). As for the live component, the artists were invited, but they themselves chose the performances that they produced. I always organized my exhibitions that way. My mandate was to assemble a roster of artists, and it was the artists who were responsible for choosing the works.

VOX: What were the repercussions of *03 23 03* on the art scene in Montréal?

Chantal Pontbriand (2019)

03 23 03 was vital in and of itself given that it was unprecedented on the local scene [. . .]. It delineated the notion of exhibition and event in a way that was completely innovative for the time, putting all the forms presented – visual, performative, discursive – on an equal footing. It led to *PERFORMANCE*, a larger-scale event held in 1980 under the aegis of *PARACHUTE*, and even eventually to *FIND*, the Festival international de nouvelle danse. [. . .] *03 23 03* set a precedent for other art events that happened later, including *Aurora Borealis*, 1985 (Claude Gosselin, René Blouin, Normand Thériault) and other international events organized by the CIAC (the Centre international d’art contemporain, founded by Claude Gosselin in 1983). As director of public programs at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, [. . .], I also organized the first *Festival of Performances* in May 1978. Furthermore, the event had an impact on the activities of hundreds of galleries and artist-run centres, and at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal [*Hors-jeux 19 performances*, in March 1979], where the programming took on a more contemporary leaning. Nor can we ignore the effect it had on Montréal’s innovative artists, whose ambitions to give birth to new forms, more in line with contemporary movements, were bolstered by the event, whether they took part in it or simply attended (Raymond Gervais and Marie Chouinard were among them).

Yves Robillard (1977)

I can’t help but make a comparison between this event and the *Festival international de musique contemporaine*, organized by composer Pierre Mercure in 1962 – the difference being, that festival had taken place in an established venue, the Comédie canadienne. So when this event was announced, I had a feeling of being invaded: “Again a bunch of foreigners coming in to tell us how it should be done,” I thought for a second – a typically chauvinist response. And then I said to myself: What is the proper attitude to adopt under such circumstances? I also had in mind a citation from Thériault, drawn from *PARACHUTE* magazine: “We believe that at this moment, Québec art has need of serious confrontations, of numerous events, such that everyone will be forced to clarify their role and their place in the cultural milieu.”

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Marie J. Jean, January 25, 2019

Sources (in order of appearance)

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