

Cette correspondance s'est tenue
peu après l'ouverture de «1000 Gracias»
en octobre 1999.

This exchange occurred
shortly after the opening of
"1000 Gracias" in October 1999.

04.10.1999

Hi François,

I saw the Stan Douglas exhibition at the Power Plant last week. I must say it's been an eye opener for me. I am struck by a different model for art. His is a very studied, very scholastic art. He mixes this with references to popular media—television, cinema, music—but the references are historical, specific. I am struck by how far from the symbolic, or the metaphorical, his work is, even though there is also a hallucinatory quality in the work. In short, I would say his work is materialist, and not metaphorical. It does not build for itself a system of references from which emerge the works' meanings: instead the works point to references that already exist, even if they are obscure, even if they must be pointed out in interviews and catalogues and artist's statements—and it is from the dizzying relationships to these real referents that the works' meanings emerge.

Seeing this Vancouver artist's work has opened my eyes to assumptions I carry about art-making, which arise from being concentrated upon my local milieu. Most art I see in Toronto, including much of my own, now appears to me as quite committed to a metaphorical model. Seeing this work has also made me more sensitive to another model for art-making, which I have been trying to understand. This I sometimes call an "engaged" model. It has been the substance of many conversations I've had with Toronto artists Kika Thorne and Adrian Blackwell. It has been what attracts me to many of Germaine's and Lucy's works.

I guess one difference between a metaphorical work and an "engaged" work is like the difference between having an experience pointed out to you, and having you "undergo" that experience. Perhaps there is something "performative" about this engaged model. I am not even sure if "engaged" is the right word. Engaged art sounds like art that is committed to effecting social justice. It has the sound of activist art. "Engaged" seems like an inadequate word for me to use, since a lot of the art I consider as engaged is not social or political in this sense, and a lot of the social art I see is more like pointing than like

performing. But "engaged" attracts me because it also sounds like an engagement: an agreement to be bound together. This is what sounds right about this model I am trying to understand. This is what I see about the spirit of the "1000 Gracias" show.

More later. 1000 gracias. François,
Luis

15.01.2000

Luis,

I would like to go back to Stan Douglas and how seeing his latest show in Toronto raised some new thoughts about art-making and about what you see in galleries and museums.

The most interesting thing about your comment is, to put it simply, the thought process provoked by the show. My strongest reactions with exhibitions I see around are always related to how they encourage me to think and rethink what was presented to me and what is in my mind. I should add to this that I strongly believe there no longer are models. There no longer is hierarchy in the arts (at least I try to ignore the ones some try to impose on us). To use your words, this means I accept that the "metaphorical model" your refer to, is on the same level as the "engaged model." I think the whole "Fin de siècle" project shows this very well. What I think is interesting is not so much one or the other, it is their presence, and by extension their interference, their existence at the same time, on the same level, in the same cultural context. And this is probably the most exciting aspect of our time and post-historical culture—this acceptance of simultaneous attitudes and practices.

And to be honest, I need both models. Otherwise I could not think the way I like to; even more, it would be difficult to be myself. I mean, taking in consideration this co-existence of models and practices, and making sense of it is part of what I really believe in, it is the way I am, and I'm certainly not the only one. It points out the very "identitarian" nature of my/our relation to art today in the sense that it is about how we (as individuals) engage with it. Fifty years ago it might not have made sense to admit something like this, neither to believe it was acceptable.

With "1000 Gracias," I wanted to engage (I think the word applies perfectly here) with artists and another curator (in this instance you), in order to address the community we relate to. It was some kind of counterpart to the other exhibits. There, one might still find metaphors, especially in the curatorial aspects of the exhibitions. I think the show we put up together is very different in nature, and in the objectives it was trying to reach.

And I am more than pleased with the results. We came up with an exhibition that is much more than a good-looking selection of artworks displayed for public viewing. The works presented go beyond the metaphorical. They do try to relate or operate differently than by "pointing out." Maybe I'm being too subjective. Was the metaphorical model present and noticeable in the curatorial position we adopted with this show? Were we, somehow, and maybe almost unconsciously, trying to "point out" something? I don't think so but maybe this is inevitable somehow, in the arts, and in their presentation.

F.

20.01.2000

Dear François,

Thanks for your note. I'm glad we have gotten back to writing. I have been re-reading our past e-mails—there's a lot we've discussed together! We've been communicating about this curatorial project for over a year!

I remember there were many ideas we discussed—what is collaboration, even collaboration between curators—what is the public sphere—what is engagement—what is communication. These ideas are very "full of people." These are the things that matter to people. In a world without persons there wouldn't be these issues. This project was full of people.

I am thinking about your last message, and how generous and inclusive it is towards various approaches to art-making. In particular I love how you say, "I need both models." It is very honest, and communicates to me that you are not talking about words or ideas, but about things which you need, which let you be you.

Reading our previous e-mails, I am struck by how tough or "militant" I sound. I think my view of the world does not include "no hierarchy," "the same level," "post-history," "acceptance," "co-existence"—even though these are all things I value as unachieved goals in our social world. Whenever I hear that there are no hierarchies, I wonder what hierarchies are being hidden. When I hear about things being on the same level, I wonder what is being covered up below and above. I do not think you are dishonest when you use these words; but I recognise that my experience does not allow me to use these words myself.

The part in your words that I feel closest to is: "What I think is really interesting is not so much one or the other, it is their presence, and by extension their interference, their existence at the same time, on the same level, in the same cultural context." I see an amazing world, vast and cruel, full of everyday things which are each beyond my wildest imagination, full of generosity and "the energy of the people," full of a thousand instances

of survival and courage, full of a thousand instances of ignorance and denial, full of "presence and interference." History is that realm where this interference plays itself out. Each word, each term ("art," "beauty," "public," "engagement," "community," "difference"), every horizon of possibility, each action, each desire that is made real—these are the things we are fighting for, these are the products and achievements of our million interferences.

There are some paintings I have made with oil paint and detergent soap. I paint the canvas one colour, then make bubbles with detergent and water in a container. I place the bubbles on the canvas. The paint is moved around by the interference of bubbles with each other, each fighting for space and self-definition, each disappearing under the force of other bubbles, and their own lifetime—and the paint is also moved around, changed, by the interference of soapy water and oil paint.

Germaine Koh

Surrender, 1999 (white flag installed in front of 100 Sherbrooke Street East, Montréal)

Side Piece, 1999 (video)

Lucy Pullen

Chance Operation with Blue Buttons, 1997

Library of Rhizomatic Activity, 1997 (bookplate)—in collaboration with Susie Major

Me and You, 1999

2,500 Superballs, 1997 (video)—in collaboration with Sandy Plotnikoff

I love this show. I think it gets at a truth I experience. *Surrender* is so open, so invisible, so there. *Side Piece* is everyday, a meeting-place and site for communication. *Chance Operation* is something bigger than any of us, something totally invisible, the shape of community, the world without One God seeing All. The *Library* is a friend, a portrait, the community of friends we make with the works they put into the world. *The 2,500 Superballs* is the joy of the world, of living energy, of being present to see the colours.

The difficult thing for me to articulate is our dynamic, our friendship and the process of making this project real. We had to develop a shared language, an understanding of how our personal fields of gravity make words come together in different ways. We are still doing this! It's difficult to articulate because it is not finished like a presentation, like an exhibition. It lives and changes. I value how we never pressured each other into saying something we didn't want to say, or accepted doing something we didn't accept. I value each instance of "no hierarchy" like this one.

Luis

24.01.2000

Luis,

Your last message came at the right moment and gave me some encouragement. I may need "both models" but I also need people like you.

"1000 Gracias" was a great opportunity for me, and an interesting manifestation of what I believe in. It materialised a lot of the thoughts and questions we had about the artistic community, about how we establish affinities with other professionals in the arts. We were concerned about how we can put up a project which is not a statement, but a proposal for the public to engage with, and for us to pursue. When I consider my intention to challenge the curator's authority, I think we achieved a good example of this with the exhibition we worked on together. There is nothing "suspicious" about our presentation because it is not meant to be a model, it does not pretend to set rules. The curatorial work was done in a very open and dialectical way, taking into consideration aspects of the community we belong to, the constraints imposed by the concrete presentation of the exhibition itself, and including the artists' own approach to the issues involved. The result was surprising to me, and it challenged me. I have to admit it is not an easy way to work on a project (remember how many e-mails we wrote to each other before we took a decision), but the result was very rewarding.

It is more difficult to judge the public's response. I often wonder about it. Hopefully, visitors found a way to engage with the works. Hopefully the work will resurface and trigger thoughts. One asked me questions after his visit. He was a little perplexed by such an "unspectacular" presentation. I explained what I thought were the most meaningful aspects of the artists' work and the overall exhibition. The discretion of *Surrender*, in contrast with its very strong implication with politics and ethics, is to me a key aspect. It directly points to the individual will to engage in relationships with others, with a situation. The type of attention that the pieces ask for is also an important element. How do we look? How are we supposed to behave in front of this object? What am I looking for, and what do I do if I don't find it? The ideas of location and agency are at the centre of "1000 Gracias." As the title suggests, there are many locations: the curatorial position is divided, the artist's "trademark" is barely identifiable, her subjectivity almost dissolved, and then the works themselves are dispersed into the social space, not entirely in the gallery. As for me, with a work like with *2,500 Superballs*, I feel a sense of ecstasy emerging from these very humble and unpretentious gestures. This is exciting because it is multiplied, returned to the community and shared. There is no other way to consume these works. Otherwise they don't make sense. Germaine Koh's *Side Piece* seems too simple to be a self-sufficient video work. The consideration of it (our look and examination) must

take in charge aspects of timing (in a past tense), its enacting, its “being now,” all of this often off screen. One must contemplate two positions: the viewer’s in the act of looking, and the protagonists’ in the use of this bench in the park. And it’s only in their relation and crossing that a certain meaning can emerge. Lucy’s *Chance Operation with Blue Buttons* I love this title—works exactly the same way. The pile of buttons in the gallery does not make an interesting metaphor for a community. It must be enacted. The operation makes sense. It must extend its temporary gallery location as a presentation and become part of the social space. This is not about rhetoric, it’s about reality.

li

27.01.2000

Dear François,

I am so happy to get your message. I feel very close to what you are saying.

I like how you pointed to the “unspectacular” presentation of the works. I think there is something utopian about it—the idea that artistic value is not in the prestige of the object, nor the expense or luxury of the materials, nor the heroism of the technique, nor the loudness of the effects, but that it is something else, less specialised, less out-of-reach, less exclusive—artistic value is more like the attention you invest, the value you allow something to have in your life. “How do we look? How are we suppose to behave in front of this object? What am I looking for and what do I do if I don’t find it?” There is beauty in that. The viewer is meant to create something if there is to be anything of value.

1000 gracias,

Luis