

In the "media" society, the political now dwells... not in a symbolic system of reproduction but in an imaginative realm of consumption, not in the act of sending out but in that of receiving, not on the side of activity but on that of passivity. Thierry de Duve

Godmer, Gilles. "Art That Resists", *Appearances*, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Montréal, Québec, p.76-82

Art That Resists

Gilles Godmer

Against the background of recent decades, where we have seen the image proliferate, gradually invade us from all sides, until today it has taken on considerable importance in our lives—and it has become a cliché to say so—individuals have had no other choice than to adapt to this major change in their surroundings. However, daily exposure to this new visual environment has had the effect of transforming a habit of acquaintance into a certain kind of reading skill. In the course of a single day, for example, in the face of the abundance and, above all, the rate of all the images that pass before our eyes, tricks for reading that have become automatic reflexes we pay little or no heed to are called for and come to the rescue in this activity which, like many others, ultimately turns into a form of consumption.

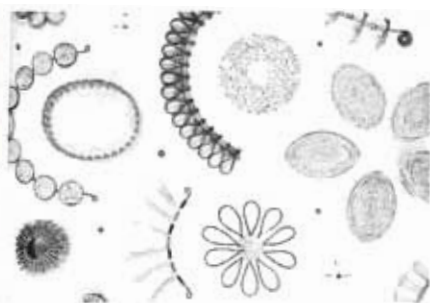
It is the consideration of this particular climate surrounding us today that gave rise to the exhibition *Appearances* which, while first intended to bring together the work of Québec and Canadian artists more or less in the early part of their careers, was also concerned, inevitably, with the distinctive reading characteristics displayed by a not insignificant number of works in today's art.

"White looks"

How do we look at things? What does it mean to look? How do we do it today? What kind of look have we developed over time, in the context of this flood of images submerging us? If less and less time is devoted to various essential activities in our lives, mainly because of the frantic pace we are forced to keep up, the same goes for our attitude with regard to the countless demands made on us by the object in our daily activities, many of which are conveyed through the image. As a result, our relationship with other people, things, the world in general, is tending to become increasingly fragmented, until it is diluted in innumerable relations distinguished by their brevity, a certain furtiveness, even a near-instantaneousness.

For most of us, taking the time to look carefully at an object or image has become, almost without our knowing it, an increasingly rare exercise which some people no longer have the leisure to indulge in, sometimes even in a museum. Bolstered by a visual experience acquired in everyday life (with television, computers, and so on), many are those who, during their visits, are generally content with an overview, maintaining a predatory attitude toward whatever they see. The works file by them and are too seldom looked at. This behaviour nonetheless seems appropriate to them and marks a genuine break with their usual practices—especially since the exercise occurs in spaces where the works are set off, removed from the myriad outside distractions. Moreover, this act forms an extension of the effort already made, namely the fact of going to a museum, which for certain people exempts them from having to expend any additional effort, in other words the time it takes for the works (or some of them anyway) to be fully revealed.

In this exhibition, it is a little as if the participating artists had wanted to resist, through the form of their art, this tendency toward facility, the shortcut, which some of us are inclined to apply, a bit too quickly, to the work of art as well. As if, through various strategies or tricks, these artists wanted to thwart the practices of deciphering and instant reading in works that, at least in part, elude any rapid consumption and so call us to order. In this sense, these pieces act rather like breaks, like pauses, in our current visual environment.¹ And yet they are not free from the summary treatment described earlier, which they attempt to resist as much as possible and which would result in an erroneous, partial reading, or even a misunderstanding, leading to overly hasty conclusions. Ultimately, it's a little as if these artists were each warning us (in their own way, in their personal range of inventions) against the proliferation of "white looks" that we increasingly cast on the world, and that in the end mean we see without ever really taking the trouble to look.²



JÉRÔME FORTIN
DES FLEURS SOUS LES ÉTOILES
(DETAIL) 1995

The eye deceived

The works gathered together for this exhibition thus offer visitors an initial readability which, appearing generally satisfactory to many, may seem conclusive and more or less in line with their expectations. However, because this observation may occur in the very first moments of their connection with the work, and because doubt sets in once the eye lingers on it for the slightest moment, some of these visitors quickly realize that something is happening, that they were probably mistaken, momentarily outwitted—a situation that warrants closer examination on their part. It is this impression that may be left, if only for a few seconds, by works such as Yannick Pouliot's *Couloirs*, Taras Polataiko's hyperrealist paintings or the works of Tim Lee, as well as some by Jean-Marc Mathieu-Lajoie.

There is no shortage of ways here of duping the visitor who is too quick and not sufficiently suspicious. Of these, counterfeiting is certainly the best known and most common. In this approach adopted by certain artists, or else some of their works, an effective pictorial technique, or even optical factors related to their hanging—the distance maintained between visitor and work, especially at the moment they first connect, its lighting, as well as its placement in the space, etc.—become important pieces of information in the possible misunderstanding that is taking root.

First it is the chameleon-like painting of Taras Polataiko, which mimics both photography and Lucio Fontana's paintings (with fake slashes here), so well that it is hard to tell the difference. The same then holds true for certain works by Jérôme Fortin that form an image—especially those displayed in showcases, falling somewhere between amulets, trinkets and jewellery (bracelets, necklaces, brooches)—and that are composed of various worthless objects cast off by the consumer society they are part of (matches, bits of wire or string, corks, etc.). At first glance, visitors are mystified. Then, curious and attentive, they come to realize the full effectiveness

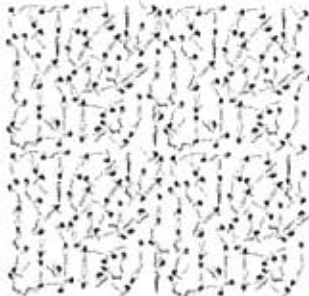
of the deception and what it entails, including the social analysis it gives rise to. That is what occurs with the *Marines* as well, where the works also contain a nod to the recent history of Québec painting; produced from recovered plastic containers cut into strips and attached to the wall in the form of a tondo, some of these pieces are surprisingly reminiscent, through their texture (seen from a distance), colour and shape, of a series of paintings by Jean-Paul Mousseau.³

The process in Yannick Pouliot's work *Couloirs* is fairly similar. Made up of an assemblage of several dozen photographs of hospital and other corridors that cover a large wall surface and form a motif, making them momentarily disappear, this piece leaves an initial impression that may make viewers think of a larger version of those wax cells that bees construct as a place to deposit their honey. For in this case, human nature being what it is in needing to identify the new with what it already knows, all the more so when the hypothesis is plausible, this immense abstraction, which forms an image in spite of everything, inevitably turns to reference,⁴ as it tends to be associated a bit hastily with the known. If, by any chance, visitors were to go no further than this first impression and maintain this strategic distance from the work, if they neglected to consult the descriptive label, where the title removes all doubt, the very essence of what they are seeing would likely elude them forever.

Taking various forms, the illusion in Tim Lee's work is of a different order altogether. Immediately, from one piece to the next, in both the videos and photographs, we recognize the same protagonist, the artist himself who is featured. The images are humorous and the performances full of irony. But if we were to stop there, through naïveté, a lack of points of reference, or inattention in some cases where the title becomes more descriptive, if we therefore had to content ourselves with this superficial reading, the artist's work, or rather its understanding, would most certainly suffer. For when a piece by Tim Lee does not refer to icons of pop music, movies, art or sports, through its title,



BOBBY ORR



ANNIE BAILLARGEON
CAMOUFLAGE
2003

it is nevertheless sustained by them through other processes or formal references. Often, it makes use of trick effects which, even though they are easy enough to spot as such, can also go unnoticed by many viewers.

In *Funny Face George & Ira Gershwin, 1933*, a video shown on two monitors set one on top of the other, visitors will have realized that the musical performance is not by the artist, despite what the top part of the work tries to make us believe, with a good deal of humour. In *Untitled (No. 4, 1970)*, the two-part photo of a body flying through space condenses the references to sport and to contemporary art. The first and most obvious one may have reminded hockey fans of a famous goal by Bobby Orr, who was sent flying through the air by his opponent's move. The other reference is to *Failing to Levitate in the Studio, 1966*, a well-known action by American artist Bruce Nauman which art buffs may have been able to recognize, in spite of the allusive and much more subtle nature of the visual quotation stemming from the two-part presentation of the Tim Lee photograph.

Standing in our way

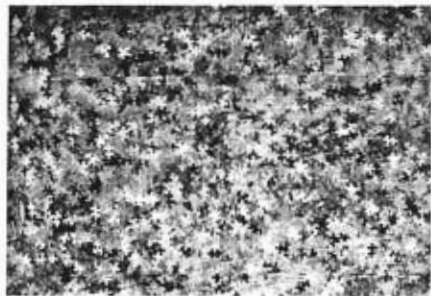
But unlike these works by Jérôme Fortin or Yannick Pouliot that create an image—to the point of erasing, in favour of the whole, all the elements at the very source of their construction—an image that alone is initially visible and clearly readable, other works, following much the same artistic process, surprisingly yield entirely different results. Like Tim Lee, photographer Annie Baillargeon works with her own body, which she photographs in various positions, sometimes wearing accessories, using her image as if it were any other raw material. Forming a sequence, repeated regularly, the artist's image eventually fades away, disappears into the anonymity of a wallpaper-like motif, in the organization of abstract figures variously arranged, or even in the creation of an invented calligraphy.

In this case, multiplied and organized like this, the body stands in our way and becomes simply a

decorative element. It is only through the visitor's curiosity, leading to particular attention to the details that form these groupings, that the subterfuge will be uncovered, and that each of the artist's images will be identified and read as such, now overturning our perception, giving us a completely different look at these abstractions which, skilfully, in full view we might say, albeit only for a few brief moments, very effectively hid from us the clue to this work.

In yet other works, by Jean-Marc Mathieu-Lajoie or Kelly Mark, a kind of variation on the preceding—the repetition of the same image, video or other—may give the impression of a mere stylistic effect, or of a dramatic emphasis of the action, were it not for a few details which suddenly capture our attention, and without which our eye could swiftly move on to other images or objects. In Mathieu-Lajoie's work, the principal material, which is a curiosity in itself, can certainly prove a distraction, since the artist only uses industrially produced puzzles. In *Portraits-autoportrait*, the repetition of a small, well-known self-portrait by Van Gogh presents to the trained eye minute and surprising variations from one image to the next. At first glance, however, the phenomenon is not obvious. *Neuf tulipes*, even more subtly perhaps, takes up essentially the same process.

The phenomenon is scarcely different in *Hiccup #2* by Toronto artist Kelly Mark, which is presented in the form of an installation made up of five video monitors. Seen rapidly, each of the monitors shows the same images of a person repeating the same ordinary gestures, seated on the front steps of a public building in Birmingham, England. Because our gaze has difficulty taking in the entire installation in detail, along with everything happening in it, our eye inevitably has to move back and forth between monitors, not necessarily detecting the fact that it is the same performance by the artist, meticulously repeated, at a set time, day after day, registered by each of the monitors in question. In short, it is only in the immediate surroundings of the performer that the variations that occur from



JEAN-MARC MATHIEU-LAJOIE
LES TROIS CHATS (DETAIL)
1978-1994

one presentation to the next really take place. Just as these people bustling around her do not seem to notice her daily presence among them, this essential piece of information could easily go unremarked, especially since the scale of the work makes it difficult to notice the presence of points of reference other than the person herself (with the exception of the architectural environment, of course) in this series of images in motion.

Confusion and blindness

Perhaps because of the material itself, Jean-Marc Mathieu-Lajoie's handling of the image, apart from the previously seen example, invariably takes on the appearance of a game. Here we have, on the one hand, the complete confusion of images which become pure abstractions, over which the eye stumbles, immediately giving up on reading them, or, on the contrary, which it persistently examines until a partial reading of motifs or fragments of images emerges.⁵ At the other end of the spectrum are these figures we read without any trouble, but whose free and fanciful use of the pieces of the puzzles that form them, through shifting, alteration, omission, substitution, fragmentation and reconfiguration, adds to the very meaning of these figures, which become Arabic characters in one case (*Poème*), or which, in the other, through the figure of Pope John Paul II, outline the stern of a ship that is sinking (*Naufrage*). Between these two poles lie yet other works that seem abstract at first glance, made up of two images that are superimposed (or that seem to be superimposed), and that a patient eye nevertheless manages to read, more or less. In addition, we have the treatment of known or unknown images (reproductions of works by great masters, especially); their confusion and various other disruptions mimic the electronic image and confer on them certain qualities of video language, which clearly displays the pixels, tremblings, quiverings and other jolts that affect the integrity and reading of the image.

In the range of transformations undergone by the images in the exhibition, one artist, Euan Macdonald, surprisingly, without applying the slightest treatment to them when he captures them by video or other means, nonetheless manages to prompt a kind of blindness in the viewer, which in itself is an astonishing feat.

Generally filming in real time, Macdonald sets up his lens in front of innocuous little scenes, commonplaces of everyday life, at times insignificant, which always lie on the edge of the event. At other times, the artist develops brief scenarios, sorts of "non-stories" (*Three Trucks*), or elliptically recounts short anecdotes (*Natura*). In these pieces, and above all in this context, the smallest detail becomes suspect, and likely to draw attention—an excessive attention that, through our imagination or because of our impatience or even exasperation, takes on a disproportionate dimension. Indeed, capturing images in real time seems to emphasize them in such a way that our overanxious imagination immediately steps in, being unable to tolerate so much dwelling on things or on similar minor phenomena. Incapable of enduring the slowness of this pace—accustomed to an entirely different rate and to the rush of events—left to our own devices, we become totally absent, as if blind to what we are shown, lost in conjectures and guesses of all kinds that, ultimately, all prove false and pointless. More specifically, as the images unfold, and in view of this absence of events we are faced with, a detail or object attracts our watchful attention, and takes us somewhere else, leading us to imagine what follows. As soon as we have returned from this dead end, caught by the images and lack of events, another element gets our minds worked up, and so on until the end, so unbearable has become the constraint of being fully present at the pace of things and of life itself.

In *Hammock*, in which the swinging keeps picking up speed, we already anticipate the accident or at least the fall, or the ejection, pure and simple, of the subject in repose. But nothing of the kind happens. In *Three Trucks*, to begin with it is the very slow and



ANA REWAKOWICZ
DRESSWARE I (SLEEPINGBAGDRESS - PROTOTYPE 2)
2004-2005

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somewhat suspicious arrival of the first truck, and then its stop at what seems to be an intersection, that trigger our initial assumption. Next, it is the arrival of the second truck, and the third—all three very similar. Each time, because of the slowness of the action, and already avoiding what is before our eyes, we are inclined to anticipate what comes next. Suddenly and unexpectedly, the vehicles are immobilized, eliciting other suppositions. Then, in contrast, two of them move forward, one after the other, giving us hope once more for a way out, and sparking our imagination, to the point of making us invent, through our search for the slightest sign, the denouement of this impasse which, finally, will still remain unresolved.

The hidden side of the work

At the end of the spectrum illustrated by the works in the exhibition, each in their own way, which we will continue to briefly analyse here, a considerable number of them push a little further still the pitfalls and difficulties of a comprehensive reading that encompasses all their facets and their complexity—which is sometimes quite hard to realize. Generally speaking, it is more the concept of enigma, in the broadest sense of the term, that these works may be quite aptly associated with.

Damian Moppett's installation *1815/1962* offers a cogent example in this regard. The work brings together, in two stages, two components that, at first glance, seem totally unrelated: first, two small sculptures, models, presented in the entrance to a screening room, and then a film that fits the genre of ethnological documentary.

Visitors initially consider the two sculptures in which, at best, they will notice the difference in construction, as well as the formal kinship that links them. The red one is actually a scale model of a well-known sculpture by Anthony Caro, entitled *Early One Morning*, produced in 1962. Even assuming visitors may have been able to identify it, this first part of the installation leaves them somewhat perplexed. Its meaning is necessarily tied to the film which, nonetheless, seems

far removed from these two models. At a slow, rather contemplative speed, with sound prominently featured, the film, set in the nineteenth century, depicts the artist as a *coureur de bois*. At the end of a journey through the forest, he uses branches to build a trap, of which we saw a scale model earlier, and whose final form is oddly reminiscent of the small red sculpture; this will help in gradually deciphering the enigma of these two components. In deriving this emblematic sculpture from the history of minimal art—a sculpture with a neutral formal character and without any connection to a social dimension—Moppett reappropriates an object from a totally different cultural framework, imagines the history of its creation and, above all, gives it a vital function, fitting it into the context of another time.

In Ana Rewakowicz's *Dressware Project* series, begun fairly recently, the work is twofold. Moving literally from one state to another, the object before us, a kind of visual puzzle, never hints at the one which escapes our eyes. What visitors see first of all is actually only part of the work: the kimono, or the sleeping bag, its inside and complement. If, absentminded or lacking curiosity, visitors were to move on immediately to another stage in their examination, they would cut themselves off from the real meaning of what they are seeing. Likewise, if they are amazed and perplexed in front of the inflated latex module entitled *Inside Out*, if they don't deign to get close to it or even enter it, as they are invited to do, they will have understood nothing about this work, the inside of which bears the imprint of a room in an apartment the artist lived in a few years ago. And it is only because of the proximity to *Inside Out* of the large photographs on display that we can also understand the nature of this mysterious, formless mass—the deflated latex module—which is worn in many different ways by as many different individuals.

The two works by Germaine Koh, *Fair-weather forces: wind speed* and *Fair-weather forces (sun:light)*, may also be perceived as a variation on the principle

applied in the *Dressware Project*, in the sense that the object we are confronted with in the first case, namely the turnstile, is once again actually only part of the work, a means of giving concrete form to the cause of this effect. Moreover, the meaning of the work lies more in its operation, in its rotation at varying speeds. The turnstile acts a little like a metaphor, in that its movement renders visible and tangible the exterior wind speed. Connected to an anemometer that captures the wind's moods, a device translates the phenomenon into the observable speed of the turnstile. Clearly, our initial contact with the object in the gallery remains a kind of enigma, until the title gets us thinking.

In the second work, which takes the form of an all-white room, attentive and, above all, patient visitors will observe, with a bit of luck perhaps, unexpected and very subtle fluctuations in light, along with others that are more obvious and more clear-cut. Occurring, inevitably, in the quiet of a museum gallery, taking its own time, the phenomenon forms an exact reflection of the fluctuations in summer light outdoors, and everything that affects it: time of day (sunrise, zenith, sunset); clouds, storms; fog, etc. Likely, at first sight, to prompt confusion in visitors, this work could well seem like an empty room, totally white, in short, a hoax. However, if they invest the necessary time and curiosity, it is very likely that the sensibility it expresses about nature and the poetry that emanates from it will soon win them over unreservedly.

Sharing this fertile dynamic of what is shown and what is concealed from visitors' eyes, Taras Polataiko's installation *Light Works* also essentially makes use of light. This time presenting a dark room that contains a few light sources, the work is spare and simple. What is immediately noticeable, however, is the fact that each halo of light has its own intensity and, what is more, this intensity is constantly fluctuating; starting off brilliant, it gradually dims, sometimes to the point of dying out, or vice versa. As will have been guessed, this phenomenon is at the heart of the enigma which

ultimately might never find an explanation, were it not for the descriptive label accompanying the installation. Therein we learn what we could never have known otherwise, namely that the shafts of light in this darkened gallery, as well as their fluctuations, each depend on energy deployed out of our sight and whose origin we cannot possibly suspect. In fact, the light sources are supplied by the energy generated by the same number of individuals, each of them pedalling a bicycle. Converted into electricity, the energy thus produced is the tangible, fragile and ephemeral result of community service performed to fulfil a sentence passed by a judge for various infractions of the law, minor offences, unpaid traffic tickets, etc., of which these people have been found guilty. The variation in brightness observed is directly dependent on the regularity and intensity of the effort each of them puts in behind the scenes.

Lastly, in the illustration of this principle of cause and effect where only the outcome is visible, Kelly Mark's installation *Porn*, the product of a complex mediation, asserts itself in a sense as the ultimate variation in which light constitutes the preferred material. Occupying a small room lit only by the glow from a few video monitors turned to face the walls, the work is nothing more than this space bathed in a flickering, blue-grey light. These monitors—as may have been gathered from the title, the only real clue to the installation—show nothing but the changing light from a porn film, whose reflections on a wall of some sort were filmed throughout its presentation. Taking this borderline form, totally immaterial and minimal, the work of Kelly Mark (and several others as well), in our initial contact, is quite discreet, if not stingy, as to its meaning. This meaning, which is never offered right away but has to be looked for, sometimes even earned, is plainly closely connected to the part of the work that remains unknown and that, for some of us, for the many different reasons cited throughout this essay, will remain so; all this at the risk of a probable, unfair and unfortunate misunderstanding at art's expense.

But this risk is fully assumed by today's art. To varying degrees in this exhibition, as has been observed, this art goes resolutely against the trend of a certain spirit of the times that favours, more often than we would like, facility, superficiality, impatience, speed, overconsumption, and so on. Totally contrary to these values, the work of the artists gathered together here tends to alter our behaviour, prompting us to make a greater effort in our encounter with the work, sensitizing us to the need to look rather than simply see, by seeing that the emphasis is placed more than ever on the search for meaning—in short, by valuing and cultivating a form of effort that tends mainly to empower the art lover, all through a great many strategies in which subtlety, humour, sensibility, and intelligence above all, truly have more than their due. In this sense, that indeed is an art that resists.

1 While we may say that all art practices tend to stand apart and constitute a break with the existing order, those discussed here do so in a similar tone that creates a convergence between them and that focuses more specifically on the reading of the work.

2 The expression "white looks" clearly refers to "white noise," a familiar term designating the background noise that, in the end, we no longer hear.

3 Reference is to the paintings entitled *Espace temps*, produced between 1963 and 1966.

4 E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960, pp. 181-202).

There is often interference between what is seen and what we expect to see (unconsciously or otherwise). In this sense as well, under certain favourable conditions (distance, non-legibility of details, etc.), the expectation is sometimes the source of illusions.

5 Oddly enough, but with different materials, the same phenomenon may be observed in the Jérôme Fortin work entitled *Première neige*, which consists of thin strips of mangas (Japanese comic strips) assembled and glued together. The overall effect is a fantastic abstraction that is gradually defused as the visitor approaches and manages to read the fragments of images all over the surface of the work.