

Désespéré/Desperate Erwin Wurm, Curated by Patrice Duhamel, La Galerie de l'UQAM

By Jean-Michel Ross

Over the last few years in Québec, public galleries and artist-run centres seem to be the venues producing events by internationally renowned visual artists. For a long time, the role of host and exhibition producer for such artists was the exclusive domain of big museums and large-scale events (such as Les Cent jours d'art contemporain, the Biennale de Montréal or the Manif d'art de Québec) but it has now been taken up by a wider range of institutions. During the last few months, this conjuncture has given Montrealers the opportunity to view exhibitions by artists like London's Janice Kerbel and Chile's Claudia del Fierro at Galerie Optica, American artist Ron Athey at Centre Clark, and French artist Dominique Blais and Austrian artist Klaus Scherübel at the Darling Foundry.

The DHC/ART Foundation for contemporary art has contributed to this new dynamism by presenting and financing a number of ambitious projects. Last summer, at the same time as the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal was presenting 37 of the best Québec artists, the Foundation welcomed an exhibition by French artist Sophie Calle, which had previously been shown at the prestigious Venice Biennial. This was the third high-calibre exhibition for the young institution, which was inaugurated in 2007 with a mandate of showing works that are among the global contemporary art scene's most compelling.

In 2007, DHC/ART was the private and exclusive partner of the David Altmejd exhibition produced by Galerie de l'UQAM and curated by its director Louise Déry that represented Canada at the Venice Biennale. There is nothing surprising about the partnership: UQAM's gallery has a solid reputation across Canada. It also distributes high-quality publications in North America and Europe, has an important collection of artworks and produces many top-notch exhibitions by established and emerging artists from home and abroad. This year at l'UQAM, curator, artist and author Patrice Duhamel ushered in the fall season by presenting the exhibition *Désespéré/Desperate* by the Viennese artist Erwin Wurm.

The presentation of the first Canadian exhibition by Erwin Wurm, whose work has been shown in the world's most important museums (Paris, New York, Tokyo, Rome, Geneva, Vienna, Lyon and Venice), gives a good indication of the institution's clout. Prior to this show Duhamel had only four curatorial projects under his belt, three of which were video related (his preferred medium). However, his selection, organization and understanding of the issues specific to Wurm's work were impeccable and demonstrated a remarkable maturity. Duhamel was well positioned to mount this corpus: his own artistic practice shared several of the interests and problematics present in the work of the Viennese artist. There was also a dialogue between the two approaches, both through their systematic use of the human body as material and through their questioning of the rules that govern its behavior. For instance, Duhamel's 26-minute video installation *La séance* (2004) documents the process of placing one's head through a wall, while Wurm's *Ethics Demonstrated in Geometrical Order: Spinoza* (2003) asks the viewer to put his or her head through an opening in a sofa.

In the show at Galerie de l'UQAM, Wurm overturned viewers' traditional relationship with sculpture by involving them as participants in the work and adding an element of defined temporality. He also employed philosophy by asking the visitor to reflect on certain matters by way of instructions posted next to the objects, such as "Hold your breath and think of Spinoza," or "Stand on your head. Lean your legs against the wall. And think about Freud's ass" (a proposition with a somewhat irreverent spin to it). If it is true that beginning in 1950 performance began feeding on theories of modern sculpture, which was at the time becoming aware of the importance of the viewer within space, Wurm pushes this idea to its paroxysm by physically integrating the viewer within the work and thus making him or her pass from a mode of observation to one of representation. Even if a sculpture is installed on a pedestal, can one really call it a sculpture when one of its components is human and it exists in this form for no longer than a minute? In addition to these participative sculptures, the exhibition presented photographs, drawings and a video, all of which were linked by a philosophical theme that summoned viewers to become aware of their bodies, a theme that was also central to Duhamel's own work and research.

Such initiative from a non-professional artist/curator would certainly not have seen the light of day in a Québec museum institution, despite the great pertinence of Wurm's work and its resounding success internationally. That galleries and artist-run centres are currently so dynamic in Québec is undoubtedly due to their willingness to take risks.

Sadly, the exhibition *Désespéré/Desperate* was to be Patrice Duhamel's last. As he stated premonitiously in the opening sentence of the exhibition presentation text: "Our days are numbered in a variety of ways." He passed away on September 24, 2009 at his home in Montréal at the age of 38 after struggling with Type 1 diabetes for many years. Despite the gravity of his illness, Duhamel gave himself fully to what would be his final project and even interrupted his M.A. in Open Media at Concordia University to bring it to fruition.

Translated from French by Bernard Schutze

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