

the magazine of artist-run culture

DIGITAL ART FEATURES

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* Art, Technofeminism and Monsters

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Ambiguities Along The Main

MONTREAL – Between the 4th of May and the first of June, one of Montreal's most visible streets became the venue for an intriguing display of art thanks to the public intervention of artist Paul Litherland. Under the auspices of Galerie B-312 Émergence, Litherland exhibited *Hésitation*, eleven photography-based sites along a one-kilometre stretch of boulevard Saint-Laurent in downtown Montreal. The artist's use of medium, imagery and location context reflect more than just a meditation on bringing art to the streets; it raises a number of social and political issues, not limited in scope by any boundary, but of special significance to Montreal.

Each of the interventions consisted of one or two street signs affixed to sign posts, mounted well over two metres above street level.

Almost unnoticeable at first due to the multitude of traffic, parking and advertising signs which populate Saint-Laurent, Litherland's signs distinguish themselves for the very reason that their intent is not immediately discernible. The artist does not rely upon text or directional indicators to provide meaning to the viewer. Instead, he creates visual meaning through a series of thoughtfully constructed tableaux.

The images which appear on the street signs are colour photographs of young men and women, depicted alone or in groups of two, three or four. From site to site the subjects communicate to each other (and to the viewer) through body language, using both facial and gestural expressions. Introverted or intimate, aggressive or flirtatious, the subjects in *Hésitation* explore themes which have interested the artist in previous work, including the instability of identity, questions of the "other" and the notion of masculinity.

In one sense *Hésitation* marks a departure in Litherland's work; the artist's decision to exhibit these photo/signs on a public street, as opposed to his previous gallery exhibitions, reflects an evolution and a sensitivity to location context. The installation of *Hésitation* on Saint-Laurent raises the question "Why this particular street?" Saint-Laurent is only one of several major streets which run north-south through downtown Montreal. If public exposure was the only concern operating for the artist, a more appropriate location would have been the parallel rue Saint-Denis (which, unlike the former, has traffic flowing in two directions). Rue Saint-Catherine is another major one-way street, one of the longest east-west roadways, cutting through the downtown centre. Perhaps Saint-Laurent was chosen because, in terms of local public perception, it marks an unofficial dividing line between the English-speak-

ing community of Montreal to the west of Saint-Laurent and the French-speaking community to the east. However questionable this territorial generalization might be, it does provide an intriguing focus point for the artist's intervention.

The site specificity of this public intervention leads to other possible interpretations when considered in relation to the absence of language in the sign compositions. On the majority of pieces, *Hésitation* employs visual and graphic interplay between the figures to convey meaning rather than text. In fact, text is present in only one of the eleven sites, in which a young Black woman reads a paperback copy of Woolf's *Orlando*, while her counterpart in the facing sign is a young white man reading a newspaper whose lettering is too blurred to identify. While the inclusion of *Orlando* may refer back to gender questioning, and the racial difference of the sign's subjects raises obvious identity dimensions, the book and the blurred newspaper also raise the potent issue of language representation.

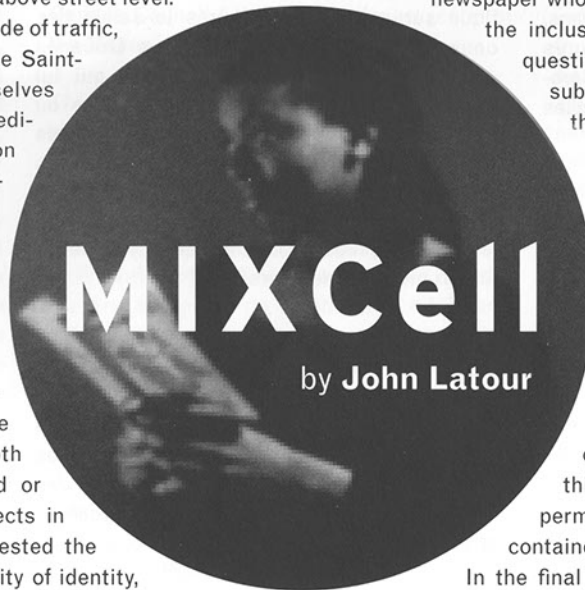
Hésitation remains a work based on visual language, but the overall absence of printed text may also invite a subordinate political interpretation. Quebec's Bill 178 promotes the use of French language on street signs, while it restricts the use of English in such cases. Does the visual language of *Hésitation* respect or subvert the language issues particular to this province? Would the artist have received permission from the city to exhibit *Hésitation* if it contained English text throughout the signage?

In the final week of the exhibition, two of the eleven interventions were inexplicably removed from the public eye.

The first site sensitively portrayed two men in an affectionate embrace. The newspaper/*Orlando* signs also disappeared, not once, but twice, as Litherland explained in an interview. After duplicate signs of the latter were installed, they were systematically removed the following day. The artist clearly labelled the recto of each sign with identification as to the provenance of the work and the public exhibition permit numbers provided by the city of Montreal.

Hésitation continues a number of themes which have interested the artist and, as with any interesting or challenging work, it remains flexible enough to allow for multiple levels of interpretation. So too does the work's recent slippery exchange with the city's official textuality. **the end**

John Latour is a visual artist living in Montreal, Quebec.



Signs installed on posts along Montreal's Blvd. Saint-Laurent.

**Photos:
Paul Litherland.**

