

***HÉSITATION* - PUBLIC INTERVENTION BY PAUL LITHERLAND**

Between the fourth of May and the first of June, one of Montréal'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 St. Laurent, in downtown Montréal. 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 Montréal.

Each of the interventions comprised 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 boulevard St. 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, in groups of two, three or four. From site to site the subjects communicate to each other (and to the viewer) through body language, facial and gestural expressions. Introverted or intimate, aggressive or flirtatious, the subjects in *Hésitation*

explore themes which have interested the artist in previous work, the instability of identity, the other, and questions of the notion of masculinity.

In one sense *Hésitation* marks a departure in Litherland's work, the decision to exhibit these photo/signs on a public street (as opposed to previous work exhibited in galleries) reflects an evolution, and a sensitivity to location context. The decision to install *Hésitation* on boulevard St. Laurent might raise the question "Why this particular street?". St. Laurent is only one of several major streets which run north/south through downtown Montréal. If public exposure was the only concern for the artist then a more appropriate location might have been the parallel rue St. Denis (which unlike the former, has traffic flowing in two directions). Rue St. Catherine is another major one-way street, one of the longest east/west roadways, cutting through the downtown centre. Perhaps St. Laurent was chosen because, in terms of local public perception, it is the unofficial dividing line between the English speaking community of Montréal who live west of St. Laurent, and the French speaking community who live to the east. It is questionable whether there is any merit to this territorial generalisation, however it does remain a popular perception, and an intriguing focus point for the artist's intervention. The selection of boulevard St. Laurent and the absence of text may also lead one to other possible interpretations regarding this public intervention.

It was previously noted that *Hésitation* employs visual dialogue rather than text in order to communicate to the viewer. In fact there is an instance of text in one of the eleven sites, 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 which is too blurred to identify. While the inclusion of *Orlando* may refer back to gender questioning, the book and the blurred newspaper also raise the 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. Québec's bill 178 promotes the use of French language on street signs, while it restricts the use of the English language 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?

As an addendum to this review, it should be noted that in the final week of the exposition, 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 the artist explained in an interview. After duplicate signs of the newspaper/ *Orlando* scenes were installed, they were systematically removed the following day. The artist clearly labelled the recto of each sign which identified the provenance of the work in addition to indicating the permit numbers provided by the city of Montréal.

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.