La Triennale québécoise 2011
Le travail qui nous attend

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Performing Time, Performing Space

In a desolate, snowbound landscape, a glimmer of colour appears on the horizon. Carried by the wind, this tinted cloud gradually advances until it fills practically the entire screen with a misty mantle of purple. The video is a “performance” by Charles Stankievech — executed in the wilderness of the Far North — of Jules Olitski’s painting *Instant Loveland*, 1968. Some distance from where he had placed his camera, the artist let off a smoke grenade, and the resulting purplish haze was transported by the wind sweeping across the snowy plain. The colour effect lasts only a few seconds on the screen — just the time to register that the encounter between the Arctic light and the purple cloud created by the grenade has something of the sublime. The artist’s idea was to transpose his experience of *Instant Loveland* into the vastness of the Arctic, to re-create the effect of the painting — one of the first without form. But the link between the two works is based on more than just visual effect. As Stankievech explains: “The video was researched to find the right mix of painting and landscape/light/smoke to make the layering and movement resonate between the two works.”

In other words, LOVELAND, 2009–2011, is the perfect coming together of an art experience and a real situation. It is important to remember, moreover, that it results from an action made by the artist, and that the abstract image of the painting as “performed” in the landscape and captured by the camera is the image of something that actually happened.

This shift of art toward performative action seems to me to exemplify a new artistic sensibility shared by a number of the artists included in the Triennial. Their performativity manifests itself in a range of ways, often in practices and media where it is least expected. Understanding it requires, first, a broadening of the usual notion of performance beyond its strict definition and a special sensitivity to works involving some kind of gesture or action by the artist: perhaps the filming of a performance, the staging of a situation, the increased mobilization of participants or collaborators, or the integration of process into work. Whatever its precise form, this performativity (like 1960s conceptualism) puts the accent on the experimental nature of art and pushes meaning away from object and toward action — but it is also accompanied by a new kind of engagement. As with performance proper, which often courts risk, a number of the resulting works take action to extremes in their effort to thoroughly explore the art experience, even to push it to
its very limits. The power of a work like LOVELAND is an
evident product of this urge to breach boundaries, for it
captures the effect of a painting by exploding a military device
in an increasingly militarized zone that is under constant
surveillance — the Beaufort Sea in the Arctic Ocean, just north
of a North Warning System radar station.

My focus in this essay will be artists who exhibit some
kind of performative action, who use the language of
performance but deploy it in the realms of image and sound.
This fertile idea (which there is space here to barely touch
upon) opens onto the vast field of the work ahead of us. 2

Another excellent example of the reconstruction of
painting in performative mode is the work of Claudie Gagnon,
who adapts the technique of the tableau vivant to the
contemporary art approach of performance. Dating back to
the eighteenth century — or further, to the earliest live Nativity
scenes — the tableau vivant (literally, a “living picture”)
involves the motionless staging of an image. Creating such
scenes in order to film them (a first) rather than present them
live to an audience,3 Tableaux, 2011, re-explores the genres,
compositions, poses and gestures of painting, but puts the
emphasis not on the action of the various figures, which is
actually quite minimal, but on sound. The characters,
who barely move, seem to be animated by an odd acoustic
presence that underlines Gagnon’s grotesque and humorous
view of the history of art, which is further heightened
by the transposition of the tableau vivant, via video, into
a moving image. Each scene — whether featuring the female
saints of Zurbarán and El Greco, Ribera’s bearded woman,
a fifteenth-century genre picture by Netherlandish artist
Hieronymus Bosch, the surrealism of Otto Dix, Munch’s
famous Scream, the saltimbanques of Daumier and
Picasso — possesses an extremely subtle audio dimension.4
Allegories of painting, these tableaux vivants cast a
contemporary, amusing and ironic eye over the art of the past.

Such retrospective allegorization or re-enactment
resonates with the ideas of German philosopher
Walter Benjamin, who saw the allegory as an opening up
of time, or — in today’s terms — a performative (and critical)
review of the past. In a rather complex passage of The Origin
of German Tragic Drama, Benjamin attempts to pinpoint
the temporal nature of this dynamic: “That which is original
is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence
of the factual: its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight.
On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process
of restoration and reestablishment, but on the other hand,
and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and
incomplete.”5 This temporal openness is, in my view, crucial
to understanding what prompts so many artists to mine
the recent or distant past, as if it devolved upon every present

2. It should be noted that at the
time of writing, a number of works
included in the exhibition were not
yet finished.

3. Aside from a short video made
in 1998, Passe-moi le ciel, this is
the first time Claudie Gagnon has
made use of the tableau vivant
for a video. In live performances,
the immobility of the actors conveys
the rigidity of the original scenes,
while here the moving video image
and the sound track make the
motionless figures seem less static.

4. To Beauty, 1922, by Otto Dix,
Family Portrait, 1954, by Dorothea
Tanning, Bearded Woman, 1631,
by Josepe de Ribera, Ira, around
1450, by Hieronymus Bosch,
The Scream, 1893, by Edvard Munch,
Soir bleu, 1914, by Edward Hopper,
Saltimbanques, 1865, by Honoré
Daumier, St. Veronica Holding the
Veil, 1579, by El Greco, St. Agatha,
1630–1633, by Zurbarán,
Les Légende du point d’Argentone,
1962, by Gaston Latouche.

5. Walter Benjamin, “Epistem-Critical
Prologue,” in The Origin of German
Tragic Drama, trans. John Osborne
(London and New York: Verso, 1998),
p. 45. I have referred previously
to this passage by Benjamin in
discussing Eve Sussman’s cinematic
reconstructions of paintings.