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Claude Hamelin: *Gesamtkunstwerk*

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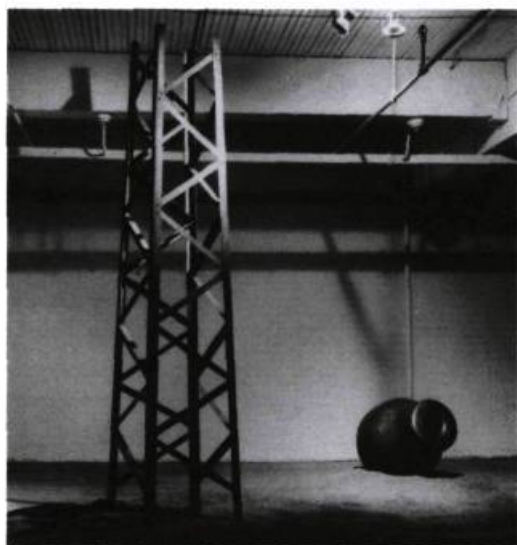
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Claude Hamelin : Gesamtkunstwerk

Claude Hamelin, galerie Grise,
Canal Complex, Montréal,
March 1 to March 31, 1989 —



Claude Hamelin, *Untitled* (detail of the installation), 1989.
Photo : Paul Litherland

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Given the illustrious paternity of converging architectural and sculptural references (thinking here of Synthetic Cubism's incorporation of found elements, Constructivism's "built" *objets d'art* stressing the utilization of industrial material, and so-called post-modern architects' penchant for metaphoric expression) it is not surprising to witness the omnipresence of architectonic allusion in many current exhibition projects. One need not be particularly venturesome to cite a myriad of examples. The Musée d'art contemporain hosted a tribute to Gordon Matta-Clark's excavations; the Marsil Museum gave Murray MacDonald mini-retrospective immortality by featuring selections from the artist's "imagine architecture", Marie-Chrystine Landry exhibited her colourful, fantastic and stilted high-water shanties and refuges at Graff; Carmelo Arnoldin presented maquettes for his *Churches of the Millenium* at Oboro; and Claude Hamelin introduced himself to the Montreal art milieu with an expansive and impressive installation at the Canal Complex. Except for Hamelin, all of these architect-artists appear to have embraced, at least in some measure, the recently popular notion of a deconstructed signifier. The socio-cultural ideal inherent to much of the aforementioned sculpto-architectural paternalism,

especially that of the Constructivists *qua* Productivists, appears to have been discarded — process, concept or fantasy subverted any essence of humanism. Only Hamelin's work rests on a foundation of socially relevant narration. Herein lies both its strength and potential weakness.

Hamelin is a sociologically conscious narrator sensitized by environmental and conservation issues. He has constructed a steel and concrete replica of one of Montreal's old-port grain elevators and entered it into symbolic exchange with a leaden wrecking-ball, a ceiling-to-floor industrial derrick (the arm of the wrecking-ball), a grouping of diminutive pyramids, a mound of rich black topsoil and a blanket-spread of golden grain. A forceful, if somewhat overt iconography (eg. tower and wrecker's ball = encroachment of high technology and heavy industry upon long-standing means of livelihood; pyramids = an ancient culture violated in the past; grain = a shared and sustained symbol of life; etc.) conveys something of the bravado of a new artist intent upon formulating a viable individualistic vocabulary and hastening to test its merits. Hamelin has taken a sledge-hammer approach to a Hegelian transformation of Idea into social entity and in so doing has offered lazy minds a handy prefabricated system of interpretation. The danger exists of the spectator succumbing to the temptations of simplistic sociologism.

Happily this danger can be diffused. Hamelin's installation also presents an air of quasi-historical drama, one reminiscent of Eva Brandl's 1987 *Modèle pour un temple de la raison* (an admitted source of inspiration). Its illuminated interior architectural space (the upper portion of the grain elevator is honey-combed with portals and lit by a string of electric bulbs) was not unlike the haunting "devastated" urban spaces of Paul Hunter's *N.S.* series also dating from 1987. A masterful and intuitive brandishing of weathered material demonstrated an empathy for the work of Jannis Kounellis. Thus, Hamelin's multipart work can be viewed as a successful gathering of some of the best recently available object/exhibition lessons.

Hamelin has produced what Laszlo Moholy-Nagy termed "Gesamtwerk" — life-work. Not only does this installation constitute Hamelin's most significant career achievement to date, but the monumental synthesis of architectural and sculptural concerns gleaned from prominent example can be read as a manifestation of the physical conditions of both life and the Montreal art milieu. The artist's creation becomes a metaphor for a vision of totality built upon socio-aesthetic philosophy and the hopes for a collective utopian future. Wheat is the seed of a socio-cultural consciousness, a hybrid "semence", planted in a fertile symbolic ground.

Annie Paquette