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"Put Yourself in My Shoes!"
The Empathogenic Sculpture of Michael A. Robinson

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Put Yourself in My Shoes! The Empathogenic Sculpture of Michael A. Robinson

JAMES D. CAMPBELL

Empathy: The ability to imagine oneself in another's place and understand the other's feelings, desires, ideas, and actions.

— THE ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA (1999 EDITION)

Empathy is the idea that the vital properties which we experience in or attribute to any person or object outside ourselves are the projections of our own feelings and thoughts.

— DICTIONARY OF THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

I.

In his recent exhibition, called simply *Faits divers*, at Galerie Pierre-Francois Ouellette in Montreal, Michael A. Robinson presented three sculptural installations that invited the viewer to step inside them and be changed. These emotionally-charged, projection-worthy sculptures — accompanied by sundry drawings and cast plaster works — staked a real claim on the viewer. They acted as an external trigger which drew us inside their web of strivings so that we might better understand the artist's process and lifespace. Robinson's work has always been wholly porous — ripe for our projection — and this new work resonated within us. Of course, the "wavelength" of this resonance varied from viewer to viewer.

Robinson spoke of the sculptures in a written statement with his characteristic humility:

> "Often of little consequence, the works confront the nature of creative expression and the situation of the artist, directly and literally. Mixing the figurative with the formal, the conceptual with the expressionist, [I] continue a trajectory of works which purposely play upon the candid and vulnerable acts inherent to art-making." *(Artist's statement on Galerie Pierre-Francois Ouellette website).*

These "candid and vulnerable acts" made the sculptures into empathy machines that welcomed us with alacrity inside Michael A. Robinson's world. It was as though a huge electrostatic plate generator had been cranked up in the space, emitting a blue spark that was transmitted on an intimate psychic wavelength to a broad range of visitors. Word on the street in Montreal spread rapidly: this was the show to see.

Myriad strivings, uncertainties, self-doubt, small handicaps, poverty, whimsy, vulnerability, pathos, setbacks, marginalization, Eurekas!, and even the artist's occasional bravado and manifest victories, were subject to feeling-into and turning inside-out as we examined the many artifacts in the exhibition.

Entering Galerie Pierre-Francois Ouellette, the first sculpture on view was *My Own Private Modernism* (2004), an aptly-titled and pristine 7-by-7-foot cube comprised of varying lengths of one-inch-thick Spanish cedar. It drew all manner of memories from the deep well of my past, from building a tree house as a child to spending time as a youth with outscale Sol Lewitt sculptures, which come from a very different aesthetic place.

As a sculptural volume that is both plenum and void, *My Own Private Modernism* yielded unprecedented and "thick" effects in the seeing. The variations in wood grain and gradations in depth accentuated the work's Necker-cube-like aspect. The spontaneously reversible optical configurations across its sides and into its centre were terrifically seductive. As we projected into the void, title well in mind, to achieve plenum at its matrix, we effectively fused with it.

The second sculptural installation, suitably entitled *Theory of Other Minds* (2004) was a table-like structure made of clamped lengths of wood surmounted by a real taxidermist's crow. The simple wood mounting signalled the artist's modesty and the presence of the steel clamps shed light on the procedural narrative of his making.

As for the black crow perched atop the sculpture, with its beady eyes and the shiny bauble it has collected to feather its nest hanging from its beak, it was impossible not to see it as the avian stand-in for Robinson himself. The wood structure was an eyrie from which he surveys the exhibition and its visitors with a cool, covetous optic. Collectors and other strangers could equally well imagine themselves as the covetous crow, of course.

In the gallery's recently-extended third room was one of Robinson's most effective sculptures to date, and an exceptional artwork by any standard: *Various Studio Essentials* (2004). It was as though an invisible column in the gallery had been coated with magnetic superglue and yanked the innards out of the artist's studio and made them stick like a vertical annunciation of the sculptor's existence. Along its central axis one could see everything but the

Michael A. ROBINSON, *Various Studio Essentials*, 2004. Photo: Denis Farley. Courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain.

kitchen sink: ladder, tripods, saw, functioning lamp, mop, brooms, working fan, roller, coat rack, so forth. This hectic conflation of objects was impeccably joined together by clamps.

Various Studio Essentials was remarkable for transposing us with such immediacy to the artist's studio, to the heart of his practice: its myriad components were all things he actually used and found in his studio. The sheer banality of the objects that populate every artist's studio and make artwork possible here achieves a strange totalizing beauty — and only makes the work more empathetically accessible. Any practising artist, any real art-lover, could understand this. The unseen but powerful matrix here was a theme repeated in other works in the show. The procedural dovetailing everywhere apparent was also a telling integer of the work's empathic potential.

We might be tempted to call *Various Studio Essentials* a breakthrough, but it is really more of an epiphany. For anyone familiar with his *démarche*, the epiphanies have been many. Robinson himself says: "There are no breakthroughs, only transitions. I continue with humility on my chosen path." (Communication to the author, Nov. 2004.)

Also in the exhibition were some haunting black monochrome plaster castings that were also decidedly empathic objects, rife with recesses that seemed to open onto the artist's mind, seized, as it were, in mid-thought. The drawings again hinted at bridging empathic gaps, with their porous methodology, elements of collage, and suggestive textuality, like "I can tell them about my theory of emptiness."

Robinson is also currently showing work in the *Proceeding in the Fog* exhibition at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, the title of which is the perfect statement concerning his own subconscious-driven process in which he claims to not know what is around the next corner in his pratice. "Going through life without knowing what the future holds is part of the human condition. Artists Karilee Fuglem, Jean-Pierre Gauthier, Michael A. Robinson, Claire Savoie and Angèle Verret share their thoughts on this theme." This homespun truth publicizing the show is readily understood by any sensitive viewer of his own work. Robinson reprised his *Sweet Dreams* works, which I shall discuss later, including a large empathy box.

Robinson's artistic process mirrors life itself. He speaks eloquently of never knowing where his work is heading. He seems always out on a limb, struggling to grow his oeuvre without any comforting certitude. He insists there is no recipe, no formula, no style. There is simply "what is in mind to say." The work itself is polymorphous and, chameleon-like, takes on many forms. He proceeds cautiously through metaphor, assembles singularities, and delivers his message.

Still, few artists have made empathy the central hub of their creative work as successfully as Michael Robinson has in his work of the last 10 years. Of course, this has not been a deliberate tactic of the artist, not some savvy strategy adopted to ensure career advancement. On the contrary, spontaneous empathy on the viewer's part is a testament to the authenticity and intuitive truthfulness of his art and process of making.

The sculptures in the Ouellette exhibition encourage us to look back with hindsight at earlier works which also clearly demonstrate the same concerns. But, first of all, we should look backwards at another, more pressing matter: the development of the term "empathy" itself, which is, and strangely, a comparatively recent addition to the English language.

II.

In his *Das Optische Formgefühl* (1872), Robert Vischer discussed empathy («Einfuhlung» in German) in terms of a psychological theory of art in which the subject experiences feelings as qualities of an object in keeping with the dynamics of its internal formal relations. In this theory, subject and object can fuse through an unconscious process inside the viewer who assimilates those forms. Interestingly, as we shall see, the involuntary act of transference on the part of the viewer is relevant to the experience of Robinson's art. Paradoxically, the empathy is heightened in this respect, in Robinson's case, according to the degree with which the viewer is conversant with the history of art.

The German psychologist Theodor Lipps used the same term in 1897 in reference to the loss of awareness a subject experiences in front of an artwork. According to him, empathy is possible because one individual projects his/her self self into the other. In his *Ästhetik* (1903-06), an extended analysis of empathy, he cited many examples in the visual arts. For him, all aesthetic appreciation was predicated on self-projection into the object. Empathy was later cited as a reason for the popularity of the new decorative style of art nouveau. Interestingly, one of the leaders of the Jugendstil in Germany, August Endell, had been a student of Lipps.

Later still, when Edward B. Tichner, a psychologist on the faculty at Cornell University, introduced "empathy" into English from the German «Einfuhlung,» he referred to the classic "Put yourself in my shoes" problematic. Vernon Lee is also considered among those to have first originated the idea of empathy in English in her *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (1912).

As we can see, empathy was seen as integral to aesthetic theory in the early 20th century. Variations on the concept appeared in the writings of Karl Groos and Johannes Volkelt in Germany, Victor Basch in France, and Herbert Langfeld in America. It was later de-legitimized by the Gestaltists and others and some commentators hold that it is no longer reasonable to claim that we "empathize" with an artwork. I emphatically disagree. Because it is clear to me that, at least insofar as Michael A. Robinson's remarkable work is concerned, we can indeed say that we "empathize" with his sculptures — and readily, too. Robinson has been creating sculptures over a long period and those sculptural installations directly implicate the viewer's empathetic capacities in their assimilation without any coercion whatsoever on his part and with genuine intimacy.

Perhaps the most compelling theory of empathy was developed by Edith Stein early in the 20th century. Stein did not dilate on aesthetic theory in her seminal book *The Problem of Empathy*. Still, it is this theory that is the most relevant to the work of Michael A. Robinson.

Stein studied under Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenological thought, who had written extensively on the subject of empathy himself in his studies on transcendental intersubjectivity and, most notably, his *Fifth Cartesian Meditation*. Stein became his assistant, edited his papers for publication, and was murdered at age 51 by the Nazis in the gas-chamber at Auschwitz. Some years ago, Pope John Paul II canonized her as St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, confessor and martyr.

Stein understands empathy as the givenness of the Other and his/her experiences within the horizon of our own lifespace. (This extends to literary figures as well, and, by extension for our purposes here, artworks.) Stein argues that empathic acts are representational acts in which the experiences of other subjects are given to us as first-level perceptual/psychological information.

Now, a Robinson sculpture is a

Michael A. ROBINSON, *My Own Private Modernism*, 2004. Photo: Denis Farley. Courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain.

Michael A. ROBINSON, *Theory of Other Minds*, 2004. Photo: Denis Farley. Courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain.

nexus of representational acts which are really "representings" of sundry experiences in his own life. Robinson invests in his sculptures litanies of lived-experiences that range from pathos to bravura feats of creative brinkmanship, from inhibition and duress to fulfillment and subsequent marginalization. Stein speaks eloquently of empathy as the experience of being led by foreign experiences. As we experience Robinson's sculptures, their porosity is such that we are led by the experiences which inform them well over the threshold of separateness into a fulfilling dialectic with the artist.

Michael A. ROBINSON, *Sweet Dreams*, 2003. Photo: Denis Farley. Courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain.

The directiveness in question is threefold: (a) the foregrounding of the experience itself; (b) the fulfilling explication of it; and (c) the comprehensive objectification of the explained experience. I would argue that this tripartite process, however partial, however fragmented, is integral to the experience of this sculptor's work.

There has always been a lot of information about the sculptor's own mental states and strivings represented in his sculptures — his generosity is a legend when it comes to the travails of the artistic life and the vagaries of his own psychology — it even extends to the titles of his works and exhibitions, which always provoke us. For example, we might have a sense of marginalization or infirmity in a given work. (*Sweet Dreams* (2003) is a good example.) This mental state is self-contained at the first stage in the object; the sculpture itself remains external and enclosed. However, such is the suggestiveness around the mental state that we are already effectively hooked. When we relate this mental state to something experienced inside our own heads, such as our own frailty, or a parent in a care ward, we move inside the sculpture. It is no longer an external thing subject to the old taxonomy. It is porous and receives us within it. Something has changed. We recognize its porosity and are no longer looking at it from outside, but rather from inside it, turned toward its object — and so effectively inside looking out. We stand alongside the artist, and we are inside his mental state. At the final stage, we remove ourselves from alterity and the sculpture is once again an external thing. However, now our perspective has been transformed — and deepened immeasurably. The sculpture is no longer alien and thing-like, but has taken on a richly-stratified dimensionality that implicates our own experience — and we have grown as a result.

What it all comes down to, I think, is shareable experience. Robinson creates sculptures which are radically open. Unlike minimalist works which made closure an epiphany, here we have a porosity which encourages projection, as in Picassos of the 1940s, where the minutiae of the painter's life took on harrowing clarity, and late Jasper Johns, where the autobiographical resonance was so strong it put the empathic capstone on his whole body of work. The contents of one of these sculptures can be and are shared intersubjectively. We can gain ingress easily enough. It is often effortless, an immanent function of seeing, a willing sacrifice of self. And it is precisely where Michael Robinson's personal meanings become our own that his work speaks eloquently of a shared horizon, a common world.

III.

In 2003, Robinson mounted an exhibition at Galerie Skol in Montreal titled *Sweet Dreams*. In the exhibition space, Robinson installed a tiny hospital room. It was difficult to determine at first if the figure lying on the bed was a real body. (It was not.) The room also had a wheelchair adjacent to the bed. A pair of crutches leaned against a bureau. Plastic tubs on the floor caught droplets of water from the leaky ceiling, suggesting dereliction. What seemed like medication on the small desk near the entrance was not medicine. It was impossible to enter the room without a vicarious sense of the stigma of the hospital. Estrangement, jeopardy, sickness were suggested. The monochrome white enclosure became an empathy box that was complemented by one of the open plaster "toothed" trapezoids, itself a magnet for self-projection. The artist's own belief in the chaotic randomness of his working process was subverted by the phenomenal coherence readily apparent in this exhibition. Joan Rzadkiewicz was one of few commentators who, writing on the exhibition, came close to the crucial problem of empathy when she wrote: "There is a shift in attention that requires more complex levels of recognition and brings a sudden self-awareness to the interpretive process."

Over the years, Robinson has done some of his best and most challenging work under the auspices of the Quartier Éphémère: *Une cartographie inachevée* (1995), *Self* (at Hopital Éphémère, Paris, 1996), *Panique au Faubourg* (1997), and, in 2002, he exhibited in *Ultra Vide*, one of the most important experimental art exhibitions in Quebec in the last 20 years, curated by Caroline Andrieux. *Cabinet d'eau* explored a hectic domestic interior event: the bathtub, sink and toilet that regulate the flow of water all overflow and wind up nourishing plants and aquatic birds also in the installation. Robinson executed an environmental installation in the Darling Foundry that, for all its funkiness and squalor was also and, more importantly, a sort of environmental empathy machine.

In 1999, at Galerie Clark in Montreal, Robinson exhibited *Stand Up and Be Discontinued*; in 1998, he put together *Trompe l'Œil*, at Optica; and in 1996, *Real Real Gone*, in the project room at Galerie Samuel Lallouz in Montreal (his Discobox was executed out of a desire to achieve the world's smallest Discotheque). All these works, breathtakingly experimental as they were, secured an empathic compact between artist and viewer.

In *Because Of Art I Sleep Badly* (Hopital Éphémère, Paris, 1996), his first cubic construct in which long plinths of wood penetrated a cubic structure, it was as though he was making a sculpture of an axon-dendrite tree, turning his own forebrain inside-out and dumping synapses on the exhibition floor like the fruits of his own thoughts for all to enjoy. Using drywall, wallpaper, and wood, Robinson constructed his first empathy box. He says of this work: "I had built myself into a box, sort of painted myself into a corner. In this show, I emerged out of the box, both literally and metaphorically."

Other commentators have noted a marked coherence in the content of Robinson's past shows (despite the presence of a broad array of artefacts which seems to privilege difference), and this was certainly the case with his recent exhibition at Galerie Pierre-Francois Ouellette. While on first inspection the works were akin to a diaspora of ideas issuing with reckless abandon from an incredibly fertile mind, we soon came to understand that few artists have so defiantly and successfully evaded the spectre of stylistic taxonomy as Michael A. Robinson has while retaining a deeply-unifying thematic, empathic, and uncompromising formal idiom.

Caroline Andrieux, Artistic Director of the Quartier Éphémère and Darling Foundry in Montreal, and a longtime supporter of the artist's work, says:

"Une des choses qui me fascinent dans les œuvres de Michael, c'est la subtile tension qui les habitent. Mixant sans cesse deux domaines antagonistes — le jeu et le traumatisme — il crée des situations déstabilisantes et réconfortantes à la fois par un environnement ludique... Cette tension est maintenue par l'absence quasi totale de couleurs — mis à part le blanc, sa couleur de prédilection — qui rapproche d'autant plus l'œuvre de notre réalité quotidienne." (Communication to the author, November, 2004).

The introsusception of this tension inside our own being, along the I-beam of our own embodied selves, as it were, as we regard Robinson's work and receive it within us, awakens us to its empathic potential and its true singularity in the context of today's art world. The harmonic resonance which secures empathy for the artist's plight, process, impoverishment (at times) and success lend these empathogenic sculptures real, visceral, emotional and psychological impact. They prove that empathy does indeed remain a phenomenon to be reckoned with in our ongoing engagement with art. ←

James D. CAMPBELL is a writer and independent curator based in Montreal. He has published well over 100 books and catalogues on art and artists.