

Adrian Blackwell: Gesture as Model

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COMPLICATIONS

Today, the question of autonomy has been increasingly displaced in contemporary art practice. That practitioners in a given discipline or medium would define their work through affiliation with others is commonplace. In the case of art and architecture, it is possible, and so often even advantageous, to engage in either one from the perspective and vantage point of the other.

We have seen in recent art practices artists whose works traverse the discourse of architecture and urbanism—Debord, Constant, Arakawa and Gins, Absalon and Hirshorn, for example. On the other side of coin, there are trained architects who opt to practice from the outside, that is from the vantage position of the artist in order to complicate architecture and urbanism with

highlight the social and political dynamics of the site. For example, a work entitled *Public Watercloset* has been installed as a “sentry post” on the corner of busy street intersections. In this work, with minimum artistic intervention, Blackwell replaced the door of a standard portable toilet with a two-way mirror. The person inside the toilet is given a perfect view of the activities on the street while the pedestrians on the outside only see their reflections, or their views being thrown back at them. In many ways, *Public Watercloset* is characteristic of Blackwell’s public interventions: it installs a threshold of resistance that intensifies the multivalent dynamic inherent within public/private realms of experiences.

contract in the architect/client relationship. Hence, once the drawing is “signed off,” it effectively seals the building process off from exposure to the potential intrusion of unforeseen events and revisions. In other words, the contractual and representational aspect of the architectural plan restricts the architect’s involvement with the material process, which often leads to revelations of the project’s novel possibilities. The artist on the other hand meets with other limitations. Blackwell claims that although the artist can be more engaged in the material process than his architect counterpart, his site of production is alienated from the site of presentation and consumption, namely the gallery and the commercial circuit. I take it to mean that this problem

that allows for a different expression of public space from that of the architectural plan. To put it differently, the architect’s drawing needs to be released from the economy of representation in order to attend to the complexity of the site.

One of the alternatives is to imagine the architect’s drawing as something like the artist’s gestural marks or traits. The gestural mark, unlike the representation drawing, performs an animated trajectory that produces spaces and opportunities. It accomplishes this by traversing other extensions, vectors, voices and desires.

GESTURE AS MODEL

The work in question, *Model of a Public Space*, demonstrates Blackwell’s practice as one being mobilized by a mutually informing dialectic between art and architecture.

The structure has been shown/deployed in a number of sites, both within and outside of gallery setting. The most recent presentation, where I witness the structure being used by different social groups, was installed at the Grange Park in Toronto as a part of the *Nuit Blanche*, a 24-hour art event in Toronto. The construction consisted of a continuous spiral ramp that traces a conical structure. Users can sit on the ramp around a centre where a mediator/speaker can moderate the event. Blackwell said that the conical space has a certain advantage over the circle, “it allows a large number of people to talk together in relative intimacy. Clearly, it has disadvantages as well. Certain people tower above the group, while others sit on the centre, but these power positions offset one another. The hierarchies set up in space are counteracted by other geometries within the structure.”

Model of a Public Space is a beautiful, porous and delicate structure. Even in its realized form, its minimum skeletal structure insists that it is really no more than a model or a proposal, perhaps a one-to-one scale model of itself. The work was cut by a circular saw on site. This original gesture of cutting through material/space persists to be felt as an animated element in the “final work.” I think of *Model of a Public Space* as an



Adrian BLACKWELL, *Model of a Public Space [Speaker]*, Nuit Blanche, Grange Park Toronto, curated by Kim Simon, 2006. Mindbender performing. Photo: Jesse Colin Jackson.

→ Adrian BLACKWELL, *Public Water Closet*, 1998. Modified portable toilet, 2-way mirror glass. (Ottawa and Toronto). Photo: Adrian Blackwell.

the “free zone” of art.

The case in question is the subject of this article: Adrian Blackwell and his work entitled *Model of a Public Space*. A professor at the University of Toronto, Blackwell has practiced in architectural firms, has been involved in the design of “real” buildings and public competitions. What makes his practice unique is that Blackwell is also an activist whose work and position is informed by certain anarchistic and non-hierarchical models. In the past few years, the Toronto community has seen Blackwell investing much of his energy into constructing meaningful public interventions. Most of these works are ephemeral displacements that

ARCHITECTURE: A NON-PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

In a lecture delivered in 2002, Blackwell, speaking from the standpoint of his practice as an artist/activist/architect, indicated that both the conventional roles of the artist and architect are subjected to certain protocols that inadvertently limit them from the kind of critical and dialogical engagement required to construct meaningful social space.

According to Blackwell, one of the perceived limitations for the professional architect is the contractual nature of the technical drawing. Usually the architect’s drawing is a representation of the building. As a plan that is meant to be built, the drawing serves as a

renders the artist’s work, a product in the studio, as abstracted from its site of engagement.

Later in the same lecture, following his line of argument, Blackwell proposed that neither the architect nor the artist, at least in their conventional roles, may adequately address the inherent complexities that are constitutive of a public space. Consequently then, it is necessary to explore an architectural process that directly engages and participates in the constantly shifting and evolving constellation of alliances that is called “the public.” Taking a cue from his work, a complication of both the artist’ and architect’ positions may foster a kind of looser, more gestural architectural practice

Laurent SFAR. Aire de jeu

Mélanie BOUCHER

expressive gestural *diagram* in space.

As opposed to the architectural plan, which facilitates a projection of a building from a two-dimensional surface to three-dimensional space, the gestural diagram, one such as *Model of a Public Space*, implicates a number of dimensions simultaneously. It escapes the stasis of representation in that it is essentially affective and not merely descriptive. What I mean is that instead of being a contour that describes and demarcates space, the work proposes spatiality as an opportunity, an intersection of drives, impulses, articulations and alliances. During *Nuit Blanche*, the disposition of the conical spiral was that of a gathering and distribution. Its material constituents were expressed as vectors that affect and are affected by the social forces that are drawn to and implicated in its vicinity. The structure solicited clamor and provisional alliances.

CONGREGATION

Throughout the evening of *Nuit Blanche*, *Model of a Public Space* remained a palpable presence in all the events hosted. It did not impose a shape, but rather inflected the course of the evening with its spirit. I recall some passionate debates, and yet the modesty of the structure inevitably tempered them with a certain sense of lightness and optimism. As the night developed, *Model of a Public Space* became completely implicated in its proclivity. Other actions spontaneously took place. For example, during the intermissions that punctuated the events, audiences treated the structure as a maze and treaded along the ramp in light-hearted procession. At this point, one then experienced the definitive character of the conical structure: a simultaneous incarnation of centripetal and centrifugal forces that called the body to attention. Perhaps *Model of a Public Space* "resolves" the idea of public architecture and the public into a constellation of gestures. A loosely and yet affectively complicated set of gestures, that is. ←

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Le propre d'un jeu réussi est de procurer un réel plaisir chez ceux et celles qui l'exercent. De ce fait, à notre époque, tandis que dans toutes les sphères culturelles la distraction et la participation paraissent gagner du terrain aux dépens de la contemplation et de l'analyse, nombreux sont les artistes en arts visuels qui cherchent par le jeu et dans sa promesse de pure satisfaction de nouvelles formes et stratégies esthétiques qui seraient propices à interpeller, à divertir et à faire intervenir les visiteurs d'expositions¹.

Mais un jeu réussi se révèle habituellement, du moins dans le monde des adultes, lorsque l'activité est déterminée par un ensemble de

règles qui mènent, soit à l'acquisition d'un gain ou encore mieux à l'obtention d'un succès, soit à l'accusation d'une perte ou à l'« essuie » d'un échec.

Or, plus rares sont les artistes qui parviennent non seulement à occasionner une gratification heureuse en lien avec l'esprit du jeu, mais également à établir un véritable enjeu.

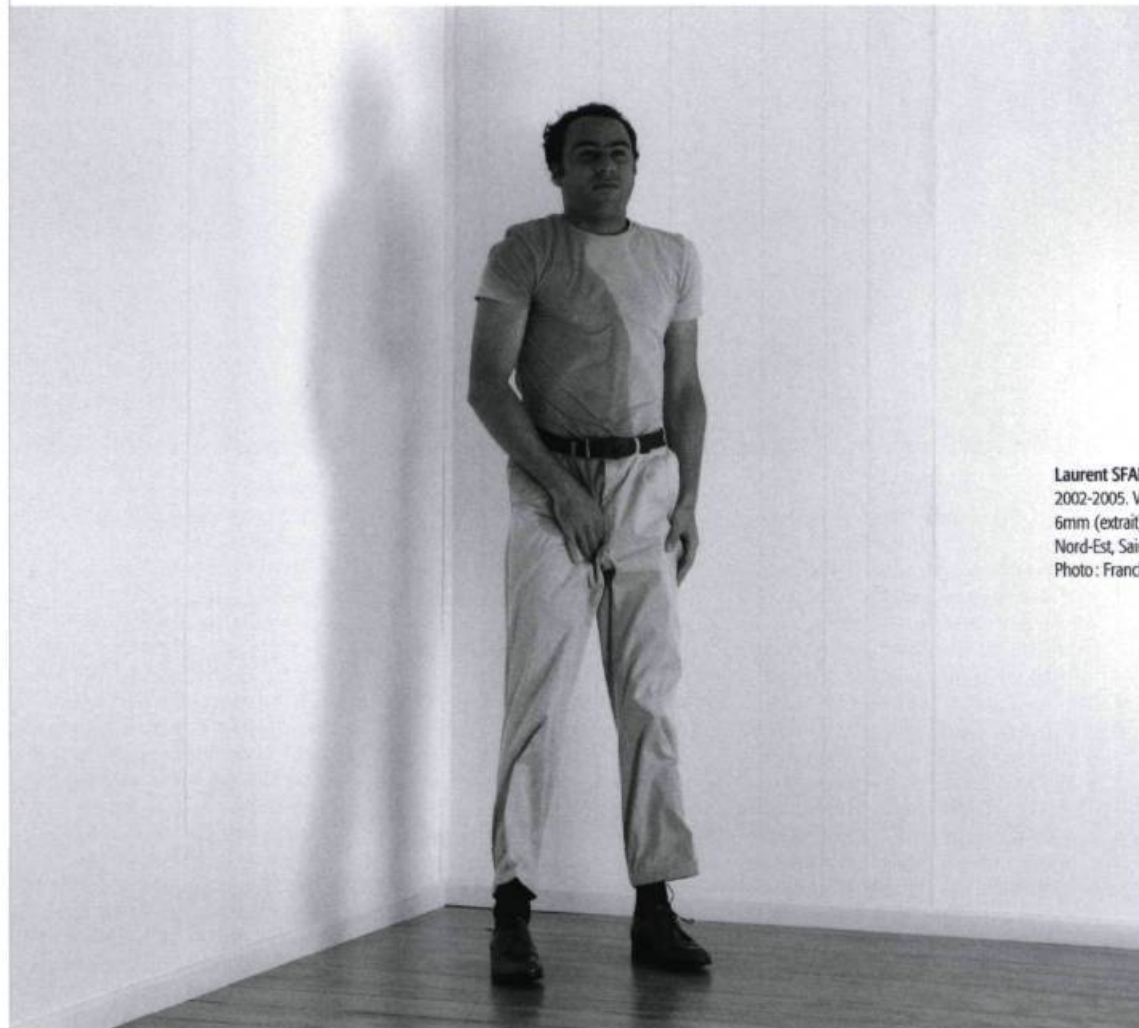
Lorsqu'ils réussissent, il se dégage des œuvres l'impression curieuse qu'elles travaillent en sous-main à nous déjouer et à nous mettre en échec, pour nous confronter à un aspect de la réalité que la majorité des individus cherchent à occulter. De mon point de vue, ces œuvres proches du *trickster*² constituent la part significative de celles qui procèdent par le jeu, en provoquant chez le visiteur une joie instantanée, à l'intérieur de

laquelle s'imisce ensuite une forme d'ambiguïté qui mène à un état résidant entre deux opposés, tels que le sont le plaisir et le déplaisir ou le sentiment du gain et celui de la perte.

Ce rapport incertain, duquel il se dégage généralement un humour fin, traverse l'œuvre entier de Laurent Sfar et, plus particulièrement les œuvres *Fontaine*, *Bousillé 2 (#e)*, *Traffic*, montrées au Centre des arts actuels SKOL, à Montréal, du 14 avril au 13 mai 2006. Dans les prochains paragraphes, je souhaite traiter de cette exposition en portant une attention particulière sur la réalisation sculpturale *Bousillé 2 (#e)* (2006).

LE PING-PONG

Bousillé 2 (#e) révèle l'esprit du jeu, l'humour menant à la dérive qui distingue la démarche entière de



Laurent SFAR, *Fontaine*, 2002-2005. Vidéo couleur 6mm (extrait). Production Est-Nord-Est, Saint-Jean-Port-Joli. Photo: Franck Michel.