

Pierre Théberge: A Career in the Service of Art, Artists and the Public

Constance Naubert-Riser

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PIERRE THÉBERGE

A CAREER IN THE SERVICE OF ART, ARTISTS AND THE PUBLIC

EDITING AND COORDINATION: CONSTANCE NAUBERT-RISER

TRANSLATION: OLIVER HAEFFELY

AFTER 42 YEARS OF STEADY COMMITMENT TO THE DISSEMINATION OF ART,
DURING WHICH HE PLAYED A DECISIVE ROLE ON THE CANADIAN CULTURAL SCENE,
PIERRE THÉBERGE ENDED A LONG AND PRODUCTIVE CAREER IN DECEMBER 2008.

After two consecutive terms of office, he left the direction of the National Gallery of Canada, where he had started his professional career in 1966, as assistant curator of Canadian art. Very quickly, he was appointed to the position of curator of Canadian modern art. Thereafter, in Montreal, he worked first as head curator at the Fine Art Museum of Montreal (1979-1985), and then as director (1986-1997). Energetic and innovative, one could say that Pierre Théberge was inspired by a **transversal** vision of art history, rather than by one that was linear or **historical**. This brought us a series of exhibitions of international stature, which contributed to making the Fine Art Museum of Montreal a place from then on known for the audacity of its approach. From the *Musée imaginaire de Tintin* until *Les Années 20* (and more recently *Les Années 30* in Ottawa), Pierre Théberge has appealed to a demanding public for whom he wishes to expand their horizons.

Let us briefly recall some milestones (and perhaps some lesser known) of his 11 years spent in Ottawa. Upon his arrival in 1998, he created a new department to enhance the influence of the Museum at

the national level as well as in its international relations. He made the collection known through targeted traveling exhibitions, of which he increased the number and importance, and he also consolidated the cooperation he enjoyed with foreign institutions. Joint productions grew with London, Paris, Berlin, Washington, Philadelphia and Los Angeles.

In 2000, he launched two new reviews devoted to art: *Vernissage*, a magazine intended for the general public, and *Revue du MBAC*, a scholarly review intended for a specialized audience. He marked the arrival of the new millennium by the creation of a prestigious international prize in the visual arts, endowed by a bursary in Canada, the *Prix du Millénaire*.

During the same year, he adopted a policy of greater openness toward modern aboriginal art, which led to the acquisition of a very important gift from the Vancouver philanthropist, Michael Audain, thanks to whom would be founded the first chair held by an aboriginal curator at the National Gallery of Canada in 2007.

From 2003-2007, during the summer season, he worked closely with the *Cité de*

l'Énergie de Shawinigan to present high quality exhibitions of modern art in the *Ancienne Aluminerie*.

During all these years, Pierre Théberge pursued, through **project planning**, the succession of great exhibitions of international stature, to which he had accustomed Montrealers. The diversity of museological approaches, the balance between the artistic disciplines, past and present, the sustained interest in the dissemination of Canadian art that is joyfully rediscovered with the exhibition of each retrospective; all this will mark for posterity the passage of Pierre Théberge in the capital.

Diverse personalities from the artistic community have accepted the invitation extended by *Vie des arts* to share their thoughts on this exemplary career and to offer a portrait of this multifaceted individual, which accurately reflects the immense contribution of this enthusiastic and tireless worker, endowed with such great intellectual curiosity. □



Pierre Théberge, 2008 National Gallery of Canada

PAUL HUNTER, DESIGNER – FROM TINTIN TO SHAWINIGAN

For each exhibition, Pierre Théberge thought of creating a suggestive and theatrical atmosphere rather than a simple design. The effect was often striking. In this vein, for the *Beauté Mobile* exhibition, there was no question of exhibiting the automobiles, hoods open, as at the Salon de l'auto. We will exhibit them, hoods closed, like "sculptures on wheels", and on pedestals! The engineers became sculptors, much like Leonardo da Vinci, who in another one of Pierre Théberge's successful exhibitions had been presented as an engineer. A revealing detail: the walls had been hand-painted with metallic powder like that used in the auto industry.

At Shawinigan, our approach had consisted of exhibiting highly regarded works of art in a raw industrial setting. We had opted for a minimalist design to engage the objects in a unique cathedral space. The public reaction was immediate and extraordinary.

Pierre spent his life in artists' studios, art exhibitions, the reading and writing on art. He has an admirable understanding of the creative process. Whenever we worked together, he always elevated my specific contribution as an artist. Pierre Théberge's intelligence and open-mindedness made him the ideal mediator between art and the public.

JEAN CLAIR OF THE ACADEMIE FRANÇAISE, PARIS THE DISCREET FRIEND

He who I once called "the unknown friend" is surely one of the most singular men whom I have ever had the opportunity of knowing. That way he has of crossing his arms on his chest is at once a mark of defense and a sign of determination, protective breastplate and preparation for fervent action.

He never confided in me. His discreet manner was provocative. Quiet, he was prey to fussy, wordy administrations, always ready to accuse you of anything imaginable to bring you out of yourself.

What was perceived as aloofness was reserve, shyness, concentration, **solitude, a mask for caution**, arrogance, confidence, silence, the silence preceding decision.

I came to know him in 1967 at the National Gallery on Elgin Street, which was administered at the time by the superb Jean Boggs, assisted by the no less likeable Guy Viau. At the time, Pierre was self-effacing. Later, his discreet nature would serve him well at what he would have to undertake in Montreal, then in Ottawa again. It was he who, by his actions, his purchases, his exhibitions, brought Canada into the modern era and inscribed its name in the annals of great international museums.

In this respect, he was a public man, a committed Canadian, clear-headed. It was this political conviction which motivated him to leave Montreal, where he felt at ease, to take on the difficult challenge of Ottawa, not without courage or loyalty. Nonetheless, the only time I really saw him radiant and full of the joy of a free man was in the depths of La Belle Province, on a lovely summer day, among forests and lakes, to inaugurate, in the company of Jean Chrétien, the new museum he had just created in Shawinigan.