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Experiencing Art in the Montreal Landscape

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It is quite common in major cities for cultural events to be held in streets and public spaces. Montreal, the largest French-speaking city in North America, is no exception. Over the past twenty years the number and diversity of such events has grown steadily, and now includes both major performing-arts spectacles such as the Montreal Jazz Festival and smaller visual-arts events produced by galleries, museums, or independent artists.

By making original use of public areas, such events help form a city's social and cultural identity. As understanding of the city becomes entwined with the experience of art, spectators may develop a powerful new relation with place. Two recent installations, *Ice Cinema* and *Desert*, show these processes at work in the reshaping and redefinition of Montreal's urban landscape.¹

An Icy Urban Environment

Ice Cinema was produced in 2002 in the neighborhood of Mile End by Marc Ahr. Originally from Russia, Ahr earns a living painting urban and sports scenes around the world and selling prints of them, often at the scene portrayed. But he is also a keen observer of urban life and has created many temporary art installations. When he wanted to liven up his neighborhood in the middle of winter, he built an igloo in front of his home and projected his own films inside.

To situate the project in context: Mile End is a where many Portuguese, Italian and Greek immigrants first settled in Montreal, and where many still live in three-story rowhouses set slightly back from the street. Known for its diversity, the neighborhood contains all kinds of brightly colored storefronts, and in summer its front

yards are full of flowers, grapevines and religious icons. Such characteristics have also made it an appealing place for artists to live.

Made of colored blocks of ice, Ahr's igloo immediately aroused great interest. It took over his entire front yard, measuring about three meters square, with room inside for eighteen people. Its magical qualities were most evident in the evening when the light of the film projector emphasized its translucent quality. Ahr's films transported viewers to his native Moscow, a distant cityscape, yet one oddly similar to Montreal's when covered in snow. Screenings were programmed on weekends from January to March, when Montreal's temperatures can drop to -40 C.

What started as merely a fun idea soon became a neighborhood event. During construction, neighbors would

lend a hand, supplying blocks of ice or bringing hot soup to the builders. However, since winter in Montreal offers few opportunities for casual public encounter, when *Ice Cinema* was up and running it also became a place to stop and talk with the artist or other curious bystanders. Emerging at the end of a screening, vodkas in hand, spectators might bump unexpectedly into acquaintances watching the show from the street. Animated by color and light, it was, for several weeks, the place to be, the neighborhood attraction, a landmark, and a topic of discussion.

In some ways, Ahr's construction was also analogous to a garden. As the season progressed, the igloo was subject to the vagaries of changing temperatures, forcing him to perform constant maintenance. One day, snow would have to be removed; another, the blocks of ice would require "polishing"; another, the structure would need to be stabilized. Like a gardener, Ahr tracked weather forecasts and planned the program accordingly.

The milder the weather became, the more the igloo changed, and through the final days of winter, its original form became increasingly unrecognizable. But this final transformation did not discourage Ahr. He simply improvised other shapes until it had melted away entirely. More than just an attraction, the project was a tribute to winter and the changing seasons, reminding Montreal residents of how snow and ice help define their city.

Opposite: The ice cinema, made out of blocks of plain and colored ice celebrated art and community in wintertime Montreal. Inset: The artist, Marc Ahr, continually reworked the igloo until it totally melted in late March. Photos by author.

Rediscovering a Marginal Site

At quite a different scale and over a shorter period of time, *Desert*, the "Sixth International Video and Electronic Art Manifestation," was organized in September 2004 by the nonprofit Montreal arts organization Champ Libre. It brought together artists, art historians, and curators over a two-week period to display work, give presentations, and hold panel discussions. However, the special quality of the event largely grew from the originality of its site—one of the city's 1960s-era municipal garbage incinerators.

The incinerator is a huge, doorless concrete structure topped by two enormous chimneys and accessed by a seven-meter-high ramp (which garbage trucks once drove up to dump their loads). Now abandoned, its future, and that of other nearby industrial sites, has not yet been decided. But in addition to supporting the technical requirements of the event, its unusual spatial qualities and powerful symbolism as an industrial "wasteland" proved ideal.

Seeking to inspire the artists around a common theme, the organizers skillfully wove the words desert, fire and regeneration around the words incinerator, abandoned, and uninhabited. A "desert" clearly refers to a hot, lifeless land. Yet heat is also an important element in the operation of an incinerator. "Desert" has also been used metaphorically to describe abandoned industrial sites. The catalogue for the event further encouraged visitors to engage in associations between the desert, contamination, the incinerator site, and the city.²

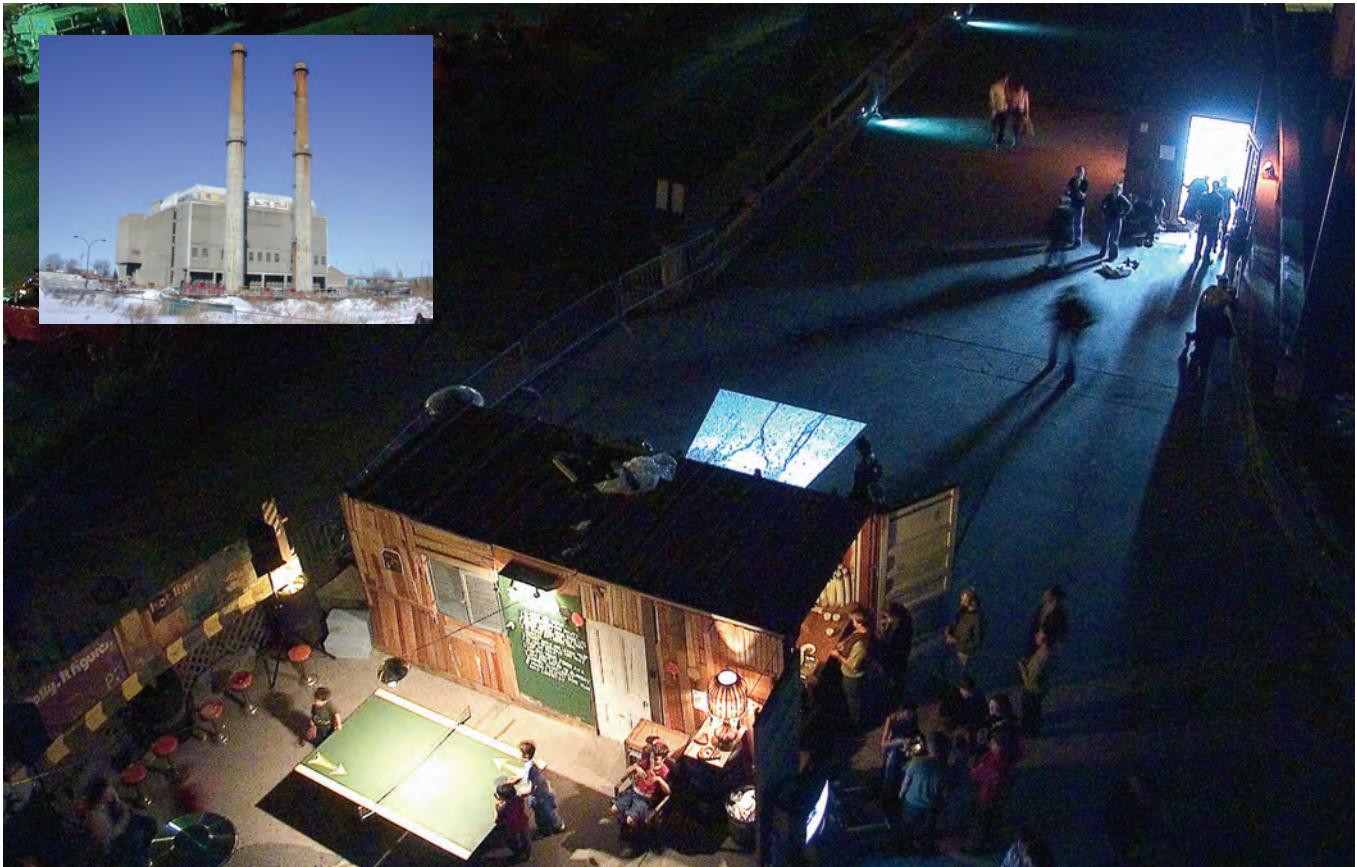
The layout of installations at the event was also carefully planned to evoke these themes. The circuit started at the street, continued along the access ramp (where many exhibits

were housed in huge shipping containers), and finished at the top, at the threshold of the incinerator. A few artworks—but very few because of safety concerns—were located inside the building. At night, videos were also projected on the outside walls, where they were visible from the entire site.

In addition to the artwork, a highlight of the event was an unusual sequence of views from the incinerator's curving ramp, including panoramas of downtown and Mount Royal, two emblematic Montreal profiles. The views allowed a visitor's search for meaning to migrate from the works of art, to the spatial configurations of the site, to the city—each aspect informing the others. In this nested system, each scale commented on every other: the artwork spoke of the object in which it was contained (the container), which spoke of the place in which it was situated (the incinerator), which spoke of Montreal (through views of symbolic landmarks).

Although a desert is a hostile environment, not conducive to walking or stopping, intrigue does create the desire to journey through it. Paul Laurendeau, the architect responsible for the exhibit site, used this sense of curiosity to move spectators from one installation to the next. In the event catalogue he spoke explicitly of the need for a mobile spectator.³

He also made an analogy to the gardens of Le Nôtre, where the sight of distant elements arouses strollers' curiosity, encouraging them to move from one spot to the next. What he did not mention was that in Le Nôtre's gardens, the distant view is also an important structuring element. This was exactly the effect produced by the juxtaposition of containers, the incinerator, and distant views of Montreal landmarks as visitors ascended the ramp.



Giving Experience Its Due

Both art events highlight the importance of experience in understanding the qualities of place. In particular, they indicate how a combination of walking and staged artistic events can be instrumental in shaping understanding of the urban environment.

As a mode of travel, walking conditions the way the gaze falls on near and far. Whether through directed efforts or aimless meanderings, it can be crucial in structuring a sense of place.⁴ For the walker or stroller coming upon *Ice Cinema*, surprise first yielded to a closer examination of the object, and then to an appreciation of its siting within the frame of the street. “Desert” made this same back-and-forth awareness possible by

allowing alternating glimpses of symbolic icons and closer examination of artwork, the incinerator building, and the videos projected on it.

In both cases, walking provided a way to appreciate the work itself, the impact of the work on the meaning of the site, and the meaning of the site within the city. Walking effectively enabled understanding of one through the other, within the framework of individual and collective heritage.

Staged events can also be used to discover the meaning of place. By holding *Desert* at a marginal site that had no previous arts vocation, visitors were encouraged to reflect on the role of art and its value in revealing unusual, marginal and inaccessible aspects of the city.

Yet at the same time that *Desert* helped reignite debate about preserving “machine buildings” in Montreal, residual pollutants raised contradictory questions about heritage preservation, the environment, recycling, and new materials in architecture.⁵ The reality is that mechanized burning of garbage at the incinerator once spewed toxic dust over surrounding residential neighborhoods. And this past was brought home by the fact that many of its walls and floors remain so contaminated that curators could use only a small portion of its interior. Awareness of these restrictions emphasized how waste disposal remains a societal problem, an insight denied as long as the site remained unfamiliar and beyond access.

Ice Cinema also helped raised social awareness. In addition to attracting a large number of neighborhood residents, it was covered in the newspapers, and a TV station broadcast a story about it during prime time. It also drew the Premier of Quebec (on a strictly personal basis). *Ice Cinema* both helped Mile End gain attention as a cultural milieu and drew attention to the importance of the street as an important public place of expression.

Ice Cinema also led to reflection on how little consideration is given to snow as a playful element of the Montreal experience. Everyone agrees the city is beautiful after a snowfall, and snow makes kids happy. Snow also muffles sound, makes reflected lights look brighter, and softens the edges of sidewalks, roads and yards, obscuring the divide between public and private. Yet much of its enchantment is mitigated by snow-removal equipment which clears public areas within 24 hours. In Quebec, snow is celebrated by winter sports enthusiasts, but denigrated by drivers and pedestrians. Ahr would rather Montreal residents forget the difficulties snow creates and enjoy themselves in the cold by staying warm in his igloo.

Revealing Places

The political and social aspects of art have recently been questioned by artists who focus on specific urban and architectural forms.⁶ Others have written about how the experience of art in a public place is open to meanings we give it, individually and as a group.⁷ Through both content and siting, *Ice Cinema* and *Desert* challenged the relationship between individuals, communities, and urban places.

The surprise of watching a movie outdoors in a structure built of ice temporarily heightened the sense of

the street as a public space, allowing people to express themselves in interaction with a community. Likewise, using walking to provoke discovery of thematic relationships between artistic visions and a forgotten Montreal site opened the city to new interpretations.

Specific to the spaces they occurred, these events helped refashion understanding of the urban landscape—both as it is, and how it is interpreted. They heightened the sense of Montreal as a northern city living with the contradictions of its beauty, temporality, ugliness, and ongoing patterns of consumption.

Acknowledgment and Notes

I would like to thank Marie Lessard for her invaluable comments during the development of this article, and Peter Jacobs for his support and comments.

1. In recent years visual-arts events have also been held in a range of significant venues in Montreal, such as the Old Port (*Les escalas improbables* in 2004); St. Lawrence Boulevard (*Frag sur la « main »* in 2002); and Mount Royal (*Artefact* in 2004). Such interventions, where ordinary and symbolic public places become the sites of original art, often highlight the specificities of Montreal as a northern city that has a majority French-speaking population and is therefore distinct from the rest of Canada. The specificity of place and urban experience was, for example, explored in “On the Experience of the City” by Optica in 1999. That event consisted of ten artists who chose a variety of Montreal locations for performances or interventions intended to arouse curiosity, controversy or astonishment. See Marie Fraser, ed., *Sur l'expérience de la ville: Interventions en milieu urbain* (Montréal: Optica, 1999). Also important has been the annual “State of Emergency” produced by the artists in the group Socially Acceptable Terrorist Action. Held in one of Montreal’s largest spaces for a week each winter since 1998, this event consists of conferences, meals, and shows for and with the homeless, intended to raise awareness of issues of climate, sharing and survival. See www.ata.qc.ca.

2. The complete title was *Champ Libre, Désert, 6e*

édition du 20 au 27 septembre 2004.

3. Paul Laurendeau, “Renverser l'espace” in *Champ Libre, Désert, 6e édition du 20 au 27 septembre 2004.*

4. The event was fairly well received in Québec’s urban planning community; indeed, its plan was a finalist for the Quebec Order of Architects award in 2005. See David Theodore, “The Desert[ed],” *Canadian Architect*, Vol. 49, No. 11 (2004).

5. See, for example, Guy Bellavance, “Proximité et distance de la ville: L'expérience de la ville et ses représentations,” in Fraser, ed., *Sur l'expérience de la ville*, pp. 125–39. Bellavance defines the experience of a city as the search for balance between distance and proximity, where distance is a subjective viewpoint on what one knows of its history. Also, on walking as a mode of appreciation, see Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire; un poète lyrique à l'apogée du capitalisme* (France: Petite Bibliothèque Payot, 2002; reprint of 1955 orig.).

6. Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), and Malcolm Miles, *Art, Space and the City* (London: Routledge, 1997), take a critical look at the discourses on the relationship between art and city spaces. On socially engaged art, see Suzanne Lacy, et al., *New Genre Public Art* (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1995). On “site-specific” art, see Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another* (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2002). Finally, Ariella Masbouni, ed., *Penser la ville par l'art contemporain* (Paris: Éditions de la Villette, 2002) looks at the positive impact of art integration programs on the quality of urban environments.

7. Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicultural Society* (New York: New York Press, 1997), explores the multiple meanings of place and looks at site-oriented art.

Opposite: A Montreal incinerator was the site of *Desert*, an event celebrating controversial aspects of the city’s heritage as well as multimedia art. As part of the show, visitors were invited to walk up the curving access ramp to the massive structure, along which some of the art installations were located in shipping containers. Photo by Marc Gilbert. Inset photo by Josianne Gagnon-Labrecque.