

## Parallaxe: Celebrating the Provencher Bridge

Terrence Heath

On peut dire que la nature du pont est d'être là et de mener partout. Mais comme il n'y a rien à atteindre et nulle part où aller, quel besoin est-il d'un pont?

Le pont des nuages, J.R. Léveillé

One can say that the essence of a bridge is to be there and to lead somewhere. But as there is nothing to reach and nowhere to go, what need is there for a bridge?

The bridge of clouds, J.R. Léveillé

**F**rancophone artists from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan came to St. Boniface in September 2003 to

spend two weeks conceiving and constructing works that would address the parallax of cultures. And they were here to celebrate a rebuilt city bridge that is itself a symbol of the possibility of linking the two cultures, francophone and anglophone, separated in Winnipeg by the Red River and a history of conflict and estrangement going back 150 years.

Marie Bouchard, bilingual, Métis and an experienced curator/manager, carried out the project in concert with L'Association des groupes en arts visuels francophones (l'AGAVF), a national umbrella organization, which supports member organizations across Canada in the production, promotion and diffusion of works produced by professional Franco-Canadian artists. "Parallaxe" was the first national project by l'AGAVF in western Canada and the first commissioned art event it has supported.

"Parallaxe" was an event—that is, the pieces were created in situ in a short time period and on exhibition for only one week and the budget was limited: a small honorarium for each artist and \$250 for materials. Twenty-five artists submitted proposals and 13 were finally chosen to come to St. Boniface to realize their concepts. The curator negotiated for sites along Provencher Boulevard and Archbishop Taché Boulevard to display the site-specific works.

There is an excitement when artists come together and this was particularly noticeable among the francophone artists who came to create "Parallaxe." Many came from localities where being a Franco-

Canadian often feels, I was told, like being a small island in an anglophone river. Even more, many came from small communities where there were few other artists with whom to share ideas. "Parallaxe" had an undercurrent of excitement generated simply by the interaction of the artists among themselves.

By opening day, 13 projects were completed, ranging from video presentations to performance, photography, installations and sculpture. But the event began the evening before with the showing of a 10-minute video by Winnipeg artist Dominique Rey, projected onto a large billboard



top left: Dominique Rey, *City of St. Boniface*, 2003, Video, installation view, 10 min. Photographs by Sheila Spence. Courtesy l'ACAV.



top right: Christian Leduc, *Excuse Me? Can I Take A Picture of You*, 2003, photograph, dry-mounted and laminated, 24 x 24".

space at the end of the Provencher Bridge. This piece, a series of glimpses complementing and clashing with other images to build up a multifarious world of noise and silence, was shown during the event in a tent on the grounds of La Maison des Artistes. In the portal of the ruined cathedral of St. Boniface, two monitors projected a video by Quebec artist Andrée Préfontaine, which told the story of a St. Boniface woman who moved from an imposed anglophone schooling to recovery of her francophone cultural background. Along the banks of the Red River, an aboriginal artist from northern Ontario, Colette Jacques, reenacted, in a moving performance, the pain and frustration that the *human/animal* must face in life, as they come to terms with quiet joys and harsh and unavoidable hardships. Close to the performance space of Colette Jacques, a Saskatoon artist, Éveline Boudreau, gathered, on the banks of the river, people she had met and with whom she had discussed the event. She created a place where they could talk, share a cup of tea and read, in a specially prepared newspaper, the reflections and comments they had shared

with the artist at their meeting. On Provencher Boulevard itself, artists exhibited a variety of works. Two of the artists, photographers Yvan Dutrisac and Christian Leduc, chose storefronts for their exhibition spaces. Dutrisac's photographic self-images were overdrawn with schematic renderings of elements of the event's physical site, the massive front of the cathedral, the outline of the new bridge. Leduc chose to photograph people he met on the streets of Winnipeg and St. Boniface and then create collages of the subjects where he had photographed them. One of the most interactive of the works of "Parallaxe" was a very simple piece by a Quebec artist, Diane Cartier-Lafontaine. Lafontaine set out a cabinet on the street and invited people to bring either plants from their gardens or those that meant something special to them. She filled the drawers and cupboards of the cabinet with the plants and as people opened them to see what was in each, she talked with them about the garden's significance and our care of nature. Two of the Winnipeg artists, Brigitte Dion and Gaétanne Simonne Sylvester, created pieces that bespoke the larger, less individual aspects of

nature and human life. Dion's piece, done in mosaic and mounted on the boulevard, represented the movement of life from water to land to sky, showing the pursuit of spiritual realms that underlies life in all its forms. Sylvester focussed her piece on birth, the beginnings of life and its determination through the cells that give individual form and substance. Gerry Collins and Jean-Denis Boudreau, both from Moncton, New Brunswick, turned to the theatre for their exploration of the theme of bridge and parallax. Collins built two theatre-like boxes facing each other. In one was a bust of Archbishop Taché and in the other, Lord Selkirk, looking across at each other—Church and State—both figures of authority. Behind them, however, Collins filled the space with small figurines, waving to their mirror opposites in the other box. Boudreau's theatre was for puppets, set in motion by a crank turned behind the stage. Life in the puppet theatre was dramatically varied, from the presiding figures of Canadian Tire and Nutty Club to dancing monkeys, jovial drunks and dead birds. The Sudbury, Ontario, artist Émilio Williams Portal built the most formal piece in the exhibition. Entitled *The Time it takes for 540 people to cross the bridge*, it consisted of 540 pieces of wood cut in various sizes and piled in two walls across from one another, joined by four long pieces that spanned the space between. François Gaudet from Nova Scotia was the only artist to present a

piece that explored illusion as a part of the theme, which was differing points of view and bridging cultures. His horses were the centre of attention on opening day as people examined them to discover how they saw three horses and yet knew there were only two there. By bending the figures and matching colours, the front and back halves of the horses seemed to merge.

The answer to Léveillé's Zen question is crucial to the future of the society we have created in Canada. But, Zen questions do not have answers; at least, not rational answers. That is the central cultural conundrum of our national life and, significantly, the *raison d'être* for the Winnipeg/St. Boniface art project, "Parallaxe." Curator and project manager Marie Bouchard asked the 13 francophone artists from across Canada to celebrate the construction of the new bridge between Winnipeg and St. Boniface. But what is a bridge? She has sought a unifying theme in the concept of "parallax." A parallax is "an apparent displacement of an object, caused by actual change of point of observation" (OED). But how do you have different points of view and create trusting and understanding relationships? How do you have two founding nations plus a large number of First Nations and create a united, sovereign country?

What was writ small in St. Boniface is writ large in a country as broad as Canada, where there is no dominant art centre and artists are spread out across 4000 miles. "Parallaxe" was an event in the

building of bridges and recognizing different points of view. But, unlike building a bridge across a physical divide, cultural bridging and tolerance are never completed. Bouchard would like to use "Parallaxe" to lay the foundation for a broader arts event, a festival of arts, that would celebrate the bridging of cultures, supporting the work of artists across Canada and strengthening the culturally defining particularities that make up the richness of a hybrid country such as ours. ■

*"Parallaxe," curated by Marie Bouchard, was located in St. Boniface, in Winnipeg, from September 22 to October 4, 2003.*

*Terrence Heath is a writer, curator and poet who lives in Toronto.*