

AGAINST THE BARE SKIN OF THE CITY

Chloe Lum and Yannick Desranleau in conversation with Tammer El-Sheikh

Chloe Lum: When nobody's around, I have super-strength—I can lift a car . . . but only when nobody's around.

Tammer El-Sheikh: Tell me about your earliest memories of posters?

CL: Growing up in rural communities and then moving to the suburbs of Ottawa, posters were one of the signposts of being in the city. Downtown Ottawa was exciting, I felt alive being around traffic and museums, and checking out the street vendors' trinkets. I was aware of posters haphazardly posted on walls and hoardings before I was aware of them having a function. I used to rip little chunks off for a collection. But collecting in general was an early interest: I'd go fishing with my family and come back with a bunch of soft-water clamshells, or take a walk in the forest and come back with leaves and petals. I was a hoarder then, as I am now. If I found a poster with something particularly attractive to me on it, a drawing or an animal, I would try to get that chunk off. It was like a nature walk in the city.

TE: Are you a hoarder, Yannick?

Yannick Desranleau: Not really. I was sensitive to bold colors and impactful images. I wasn't often in town as a kid, but when I was, I tried to maximize the experience. On a school trip at age nine to the planetarium, I remember noticing posters.

CL: My memories are earlier, but it was a neighborhood not far from there. Around age five my uncle from Montreal would take us to the flea market in the old port. That's when I started collecting scraps of posters. I also got my uncle to buy me a bunch of small glass animals. Coming from rural New Brunswick, my experience of the city included all of this—seeing punks, posters and glass miniatures.

TE: Do you like crafts? Are posters part of a folk tradition for you?

CL: There's definitely a charm to handmade objects. It might have to do with a lot of time spent at church fundraisers—my aesthetic might have come from exposure to macramé angels!

TE: Yannick, are posters a folk art for you?

YD: I always thought of posters as part of a dialogue within the city.

TE: Tell me about the mode of address you employ when you make a poster. How do they communicate? How do you approach a visual language with a specific message in mind?

CL: It's important nowadays to appreciate the ubiquity of advertising in our environment. We are constantly advertised to. When posterizing—a community-based advertising—it's important to address yourself in a specific way to cut through the advertising space.

YD: The dialogue of a poster occurs as a result of a response to the poster at the physical level. The poster is a signifier that elicits not just a response, but a behavior: people come out to a show, etc.

CL: There's a Korean Church in our neighborhood. They use posters to advertise youth group activities in the basement of the church. People who can't read the posters wouldn't want to be there anyway. So, they are meant to be exclusive and specifically reach Korean youth in the neighborhood. Posters allow communities to find each other.

YD: Posters establish a geographical presence for communities. The car culture makes it very difficult to gather as a community in a public space. In the absence of gatherings, posters are used in public space as a device for gathering elsewhere. By definition, the poster has a narrow radius of action or impact. It's not something that travels like TV or radio. Posters are a marginal means of communication. They aren't as efficient as major broadcast media but that's a source of their appeal. These constraints or limits on posters make them attractive for anarchistic and community-based or grassroots activities and purposes.

TE: The art historian Jonathan Crary says TV is a homogenous and uniform macro phenomenon: transmissions are controlled in studio and transmitted from a central source. But, at the local level, the same macro phenomenon is full of cracks, transformed in the act of consumption. Do you think of this dynamic of production, consumption, and spectacle in your poster practice?

YD: There are things you can't do on TV. There are also municipal laws that discourage posterizing—but they aren't working to stop the activity. People are able to defy the restrictions on posterizing. TV would be much more difficult to crack: it requires a bigger budget, a bandwidth. Posterizing is inefficient in a freeing way.

TE: Uwe Loesch¹ says a bad poster loves you, a good poster attacks you, and there are “art-for-art's sake” posters that love themselves. Where do your posters fit in to this scheme?

CL: We definitely see a little bit of column three (“art for art”) in what we do. We're not trying to be shocking we're trying to be fresh. It's pragmatic too. If you're establishing your own visual language and pushing that forward, it narrows your audience but your work will be noticed. We try for a singular voice.

TE: And the posters love themselves too?

YD: The categories are a little too rigid—realistically, there's a bit of all three elements in the posters most of the time.

TE: You did a poster for a conference at McGill University on Crime, Media and Culture², and another for the Law Department on Levinas³. How do you approach different commissions—corporate, academic—what's the difference?

YD: There's a lot of free interpretation, but we try to learn about our subject matter. We insist on as much creative freedom as possible, but for corporate clients we have to conform to art direction.

TE: At the McGill conference, one of the papers was on “chick dicks”—female detectives in crime fiction. You illustrated this academic content in the poster with a gun/dick pushing through a pair of pants.

YD: We tried to make a link with the classic idea of the detective movie. We put four thieves along the top of the poster with different, fantastical skin colors.

CL: The skin colors are unrealistic; we didn't want to racialize crime. We wanted to suggest that crime is pervasive and could be perpetrated by anyone at all.

TE: Were you illustrating a paper from the conference on *Physiognomy and Criminal Identification*?

CL: We weren't given any information about the specific papers. We were just working with a paranoid idea: “they are among us . . . nice people can do bad things.” We wanted to suggest that the stereotypes we have do not necessarily correspond with the realities of crime.

YD: For a poster maker, it's ideal to have substantial content, and a clear reason. It's easy, on the one hand, because you're telling a story. For the Levinas poster, we read about the philosopher's concepts of ethics, conscience, and intersubjective relations. These philosophical concepts were translated directly by splitting Levinas' portrait into two halves and installing a smaller profile in a mediating position between.

CL: Academic commissions give us a lot of freedom because there's a subject to explore.

TE: Jasper Johns (*1930) says he works with banal subject matter—a readymade motif (i.e. targets, flags, stenciled numbers)—to allow for a totally free development of the work beyond the level of content. The constraint of subject matter for him is enabling and freeing as well. Tell me about your influences—from the graphic arts and the fine arts.

YD: The graphic designer Vittorio Fiorucci (1932–2008) had a really bold style—hard-edged, local colors. He's from an Italian/Yugoslavian family. The Eastern European influence on his work was strong and it appealed to me. A lot of what we know about modern graphic design comes from Eastern Europe, Poland and Italy. He regarded posters as the ultimate art medium—a public medium but one that reached specific people. Vittorio started as a photographer and moved to posterizing because he sought a medium that would produce a maximal public effect. He felt painting was completely unsuited for this purpose. There was a setting in Montreal when he arrived, but he brought a lot of legitimacy to the culture of graphic design in this country.

CL: Poster art had been legitimate for a while in Europe. The Victoria and Albert Museum did their first poster exhibition in 1909; it was a very legitimate salon-style exhibition. All their holdings represent the formal/functional limits of a given design object-class. The original idea for the founders, Victoria and Prince Albert, was that it would be a repository for artists of all kinds. The divisions between the arts weren't so policed; designers were learning from fine artists and vice versa. The distinction between the high and low arts (high and applied arts) is a completely false one. What's more important is the content of the work. The distinction operates on the assumption that "art for art's sake" has no commercial investment; which is not at all true.

TE: You attended Concordia University within the studio arts program⁴ but left Concordia after a couple of years to begin a new, more constructive and less formal "apprenticeship" of sorts with the graphic designer Art Chantry. How did that come?

CL: It started with a post on gigposters.com. We posted an ethical conundrum on the site and Art (Chantry) answered our question. Someone wanted us to run off a bunch of prints for them, but we recognized the image that they were attempting to pass off as their own. Art agreed that we shouldn't do the job; our ethics and aesthetics were aligned from the start. We really admired his work and were glad to talk online when he invited us. At first, he'd give us reviews of our work online. Then we began sending tubes of our prints to him and he'd respond with detailed critique. Every couple of months, we'd send him a tube of our work for which he'd give us grades and pointed reviews: "This is good, this is sloppy, I don't understand what's going on here conceptually; if you can't understand it, drop it." Clarity was important for him: we had to be able to explain what we were doing and why, as far as he was concerned. He pushed us to think of working on the poster as a whole composition. He also pushed us to develop our own voice. Our confidence to do more and more experimental work had a lot to do with his support of us in the graphic-design community. We had an informal mentorship with him. He pulled no punches. If something wasn't working, he'd just tell us. He insisted on our being able to talk about our work, to explain the work. One of the most helpful and encouraging things he said was that everybody has thousands of mediocre ideas that they need to get out of their system before they do good work. Our resolve to make a living as poster artists and musicians was a result of Art's advice to a large extent.

YD: It was so liberating to work with Art after having had the completely different experience of art school. The academic approach and Art's approach involved two very different perspectives on the relationship between the work process and the conception of our work. In art school, we were graded on work in progress, but the final product and idea was the real, if unacknowledged, standard-bearer. Our work was always measured against a master-concept that we were expected to formulate in advance. This projective approach seemed contrived and didn't allow for much invention or discovery along the way. With Art's direction we were encouraged to just work—not make the right work right away. Our major concerns and formal achievements were developed through practice and then articulated retrospectively after having completed a lot of work. Art told us to get comfortable with the prospect of making a lot of mediocre or bad work—but even failures would help to clarify our ideas in future projects. There seemed to be no place for constructive errors in art school. With Art's help, we came to regard our work as part of an interminable process of refinement, not fulfilled by a projected concept, but worthwhile as part of a process. It's like any cultural or intellectual history. Descartes begins a history of modern philosophy and, in our time, a thinker like Slavoj Žižek ('1949) is well aware of those beginnings, but not restricted by them. And, even a rejected Cartesian idea in Žižek's writing is productive.

CL: Art taught us to be able to criticize ourselves. We're able to look at failed work and make it useful.

YD: The postering medium is especially suited for self-critique, because it's a disposable medium. The work is made to forget. It's ephemeral, so mistakes are easy to let go of and move beyond. Ultimately, we're defined by our good work, but we're not tethered to it.

CL: Art demanded much more from us than the instructors at art school. He gave us tough-love. He'd say, "Sure you guys are good, but you're not great, not yet."

TE: Did you have an eventual move to fine arts in mind when you were working with Art?

YD: We were both doing prints at art school, but there was a lot of other training. We were doing performance pieces with posters at one point. When we came to postering, it was just natural in terms of our creative disposition. We enjoyed printmaking at school and we'd acquired good tools for postering, but we wanted to go further than we could in art school. There was something we wanted to talk about during our training at Concordia but couldn't. Postering eventually recommended itself as the best option to articulate what we wanted to from the beginning. Moving from postering to installations was part of a continuous development, and something very fresh and articulate has come of it. The turn to installation has really clarified early interests. We can talk about our work in a very informed way, and the work expresses visually a whole range of concerns we've had for years. In our installations, a number of questions that came up in our poster practice are readdressed but in a different institutional context, and under different formal constraints: What are the politics of postering; in general, and in a particular city or in a particular neighborhood? What is graphic design and what is its history; where do we fit into that history as practitioners? What is the relationship between people and posters in the streets, in the gallery?

TE: How does your music relate to your printmaking/installation practice and vice versa?

YD: The idea of layering and accumulation is common to both our music and our prints. In our music, we work a lot with polyrhythms and atonality.⁵ Posters work in a similar way: They create an order and organization as signposts, but they emerge in an unpredictable, chaotic way. The city's skin of posters is constantly changing according to municipal laws and restrictions, and according to who has something to post, when and why. The polyphony and polyrhythm in our music has a parallel in the visual dimension with posters in the street; they communicate a public voice.

TE: How is the city represented in the posters—figuratively? There are a lot of humanoid types in your compositions—humanized animals, animalized humans—are these urban types, or are they anthropomorphic representations of the city as a changing space?

CL: As Lux Interior the frontman from the Cramps said: "The city is a jungle and I am a beast . . . cuz I want the most and I'll take the least."

YD: The figures are often distorted or abstracted. The decisions we're making in work that doesn't clearly represent a particular figure are mainly formal. We're thinking about relationships between empty spaces, text, hand-drawn elements. Text always shifts with hand-drawn forms in a continuum. We're working in a modernist mode in some respects; thinking about guiding the viewer's eye in a photomechanical way. Focal points, color harmonics, flat space and recession are important for us. But, spatial organization is as interesting as disorganization, and a color harmony is as valid as a disharmony. When I started my training in visual arts, I was obsessed with the Montreal-based *Plasticien* movement⁶ (Serge Lemoine, Claude Tousignant, Guido Molinari, et al). They had a real commitment to working with visual harmonies and disharmonies. They had public concerns too. Jean-Paul Mousseau (1927–91), an associate of the *Plasticiens* became the art director for the Bureau du Métro and developed a program for public art in the transit system.

CL: I think public art projects have a lot to do with why we're so interested in transit systems. I noticed public art installations in Montreal's transit system but also in Mexico City. It was part of the experience of the city for me—like posters.

YD: Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981) project in New York was interesting for me. It was a hotheaded affront to the public commission board. His design for a wall that separated a public space into two proved to be a bit of a public intervention! The work became a security concern for the city because it interrupted sight lines and doubled as a barricade. The work was loaded with significance – formal and political – and raised public safety issues. In Montreal, there have been contests between city executives and artists for years. A UQAM⁷ artist named Pierre Granche (1948–1997) designed near Parc La Fontaine an installation of chairs that people couldn't sit on. The residents demanded that the city only commission public-art projects that people could interact with comfortably. Ultimately, the artist was forced to change the design; now some of the chairs are usable. As far as the residents were concerned, a public commission should be either utilitarian or monumental and initially the design was neither.

CL: When I was young, I was captivated by a public arts controversy at the National Gallery. I remember following the coverage in the *Ottawa Citizen* about the acquisition of Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire* (1967), a 1,800,000 US-dollar abstract painting that taxpayers were apparently not happy to have helped purchase. After seeing how upset people got, it just seemed to me that artists could be really, really powerful.

TE: If you had to choose between music and visual art what would you do?

CL: Both music and printmaking come from the same compulsion. Yannick's parents beg us to stop being scroungers. They want us to go work for ad agencies. Our friends that should understand—the artists—think we should dump the band and focus on our art, partly because we get more positive response to our visual art. But, the two feed into each other so much. The social aspect of our music contributes a lot to our overall creative life. Stopping prints or music fills me with an intense feeling of sadness . . . and overwhelming misery. We were thinking of going back to school, but we'd have to stop touring with the band. The prospect of stopping—for any reason, even if it's just for a couple of years—sounds so horrible to me. One of the greatest things about being in a band is the random and impulsive travel.

TE: So what is it: music or art?

CL: You're asking if I'd rather give up my right hand or my left hand? Ask me in a couple of years?

TE: You might be ready for a stump then?

CL: I might be ready to grow a new limb.

Postscript by Tammer El-Sheikh

Chloe and Yannick have concentrated in recent years on their sculpture installations. The work they have planned for the Kunsthalle is both a send-up of the ideals of urbanism espoused by Le Corbusier, and a serious exploration of the materials, limits, and techniques of the print medium. Several days after the interview at their home, I had a chance to see the two at work on the Kunsthalle project at their Mile End studio. The sheer volume of prints planned for the project (forty-nine stencils and over one thousand individual prints) is overwhelming and demands long days at the press and a finely tuned choreography of inking, registering and racking proofs. Somewhere between Henry Ford and Warhol, their dance is a labor of love and a division of labor. The installation will involve, among other things, dozens of hand-drawn caricatures of Le Corbusier strewn across the floor and a textual element on the wall that reads "Shits and Giggles." When I first heard about the plan at their home, I was concerned about how the phrase would be received. It was an embarrassingly humorless concern to which Chloé and Yannick responded appropriately, insistently and intelligently with good humor!

This conversation took place in Yannick Desranleau's and Chloe Lum's home studio in Montreal on March 4, 2010.

1 — Uwe Loesch (*1943 in Dresden) is a German graphic designer and professor. He is known as one of the international leading Poster-Artists.

2 — *Crime, Media and Culture: A symposium at McGill University*, Montreal, May, 18–19, 2007.

3 — *Centenary Conference on Levinas and Law*, Montreal, September 18–9, 2006. Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95), French philosopher and Talmudic commentator.

4 — It is difficult to imagine them working within an impersonal pedagogical structure. It is not that they lack discipline; on the contrary, their co-op studio space in Montreal's Mile End district, cleverly named the *100 Sided Die* seems like an institution in its own right. (The space currently houses the studios of twenty-three artists.)

5 — Lum and Desranleau play in AIDS Wolf, a noise-rock band and Hamborghinni, a drums and electronics project.

6 — Canadian non-figurative painting movement which appeared around 1955. The movement was launched by the *Manifeste des plasticiens*.

7 — Université du Québec à Montréal.

Dieter Buchhart (*1971) is curator, art theoretician and author. From 1990 until 2000, he studied biology, genetics and biochemistry, and also studied restoration and art history at the University of Vienna. He holds a doctorate in both fields. Buchhart is author and publisher of numerous articles, catalogues and monographs, including analyses of Edvard Munch and Mark Dion. He also works as a conceptual artist, mainly in the fields of video and installation. He served as museum director of the Kunsthalle Krems (Austria) from 2008 until 2009. He curated the exhibition Basquiat (May 9 until September 5, 2010, Fondation Beyeler in Riehen, Switzerland), Europe's most comprehensive retrospective devoted to Jean-Michel Basquiat to date.

Tamra Davis (TD; *1962) is an American film and music video director. She is known for directing films such as *Billy Madison* (1995), *CB4* (1993) starring Chris Rock, *Half Baked* (1998) starring Dave Chappelle, *Crossroads* (2002) starring Britney Spears, and television shows such as *My Name Is Earl* (2005–09) and *Everybody Hates Chris*. Among the music videos she directed are *But Not Tonight* (1986) by Depeche Mode; *Netty's Girl* (1989) by the Beastie Boys; *Kool Thing* (1990); *Dirty Boots* (1991), *100%* (1992) and *Bull In The Heather* (1994) by Sonic Youth; *I Got You Babe* (1993) by Cher with Beavis & Butt-Head, *It's About Time* (1993) and *Big Gay Heart* (1994) by The Lemonheads. Most recently, Davis directed the documentary *Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child* (2010), which draws upon the rare, intimate film footage she had made of her friend Basquiat.

Tammer El-Sheikh (TE; *1975) is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Art History and Communications Studies at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. He is a recipient of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council's Canada Graduate Scholarship (SSHRC), and has published essays, reviews of exhibitions and book reviews in *C Magazine*, *Parachute* and *Canadian Art Magazine*.

Nathalie Halgand (NH; *1983) finished her studies in art history in 2009 at the University of Vienna. Since 2008, she and Nicholas Platzer direct INOPERABLE, an art space in Vienna that specializes in urban culture with a focus on international street art.

Cathérine Hug (CH; *1976) studied journalism, media science and art history with Stanislaus von Moos at the University of Zurich (Switzerland). From 2000 until 2007, she was an assistant curator at the Kunsthau Zürich, where she worked with Bice Curiger and others. From 2005 until 2008, she was an assistant with Art Unlimited at the Art Basel. As a freelance curator, she has organized exhibits that include *Unloaded* (Oberschan 2002–03) with Giovanni Carmine and the artists Christoph Büchel, Monica Bonvicini, Ryan Gander, Olivier Mosset and Shahryar Nashat; *In The Alps* with Tobia Bezzola (Kunsthau Zürich, 2006); and *Carola Giedion-Welcker and Modernism* (Kunsthau Zürich, 2007). Since 2008, she is curator at the KUNSTHALLE wien, where she curated *Thomas Ruff: Surfaces, Depths* (2009) and with Gerald Matt *1989. End of History or Beginning of the Future?* (2009–10).

Thomas Mießgang (TM; *1955) studied German and Roman languages at the University of Vienna and worked as a journalist and freelance writer for *Falter*, *profil*, *Die Zeit*, and ORF Radio. From 1994–1996, he served as an advisor to Vienna's Commissioner for Cultural Affairs, Ursula Pasterk. Since 2000, he has been curator at the KUNSTHALLE wien and since 2007 he has been chief curator. The exhibitions he curated include *Erwin Puls. Die Phantome des Begehrens* (2009); *Punk. No One is Innocent. Kunst-Stil-Revolve* (2008); *Raymond Pettibon. Whatever it is you're looking for you*