

JANUARY 11 – MARCH 8, 2014

VEXTATIONS | YANNICK DESRANLEAU & CHLOE LUM (SÉRIPOP)



Yannick Desranleau & Chloe Lum (Seripop), *Looming*, 2013. Photo by Allan Kosmajac

“WHAT THE FUCK IS ART FOR?”¹
(OR, CEASELESSLY ON THE VERGE OF... BUT NOT QUITE THERE)

“In order to play the theme 840 times in succession, it would be advisable to prepare yourself beforehand, and in the deepest silence, by serious immobilities.”

At the close of the 19th century, the French avant-garde composer Erik Satie composed *Vexations*, a few sparse bars of musical notation with the above open-ended caveat. Written in enharmonic style – an eccentric and unconventional musical grammar that is difficult to decipher – Satie’s haunting staircase of dissonant intervals remained silent in his archive, a joke perhaps not even intended for public reading, with very little instruction on its performance other than ‘très lent.’

Seventy years later John Cage resuscitated it, and his similar inclination for chance, the irrational and duration inspired him to perform the piece to its full potential. Following the 19-hour performance in 1963, Cage and his team of 11 pianists re-emerged from New York’s City’s Pocket Theatre. As Cage later described its affects: “I had changed, and the world had changed.”² Since then, *Vexations* has become shrouded and over-shrouded by myth and its hypnotic, transformative possibilities. As an artistic ‘rite of passage,’ its minimalist form has lent itself to endless interpretation and variations, like a riddle with no intended resolution.

Yannick Desranleau and Chloe Lum have their own dynamic approach to riddles, so it’s no surprise that this Montréal-based duo, known to many as Séripop, have referenced Satie in their work for Access Gallery. Since 2002, their collaboration has extended across the visual arts, experimental graphic design, and music – notably their involvement in the noise-rock band, AIDS Wolf. Their site-responsive installations, sculpted from sheets of brightly coloured screen-printed paper, unfurl a visual vocabulary that collapses categories, transmogrifies aesthetic references and generates a dizzying array of narratives, all staged as an experiment for the viewer’s subjectivity. Séripop takes viewers down a rabbit hole, with punch lines that are deliberately suspended in precarity.

Over the past few years, Desranleau and Lum’s process has been increasingly guided by ‘directed chance,’ allowing improvisation and experimentation to shape their resulting installations.³ Graphics in obnoxious colours collide, gesturing outwards to unspecific references in an absurdity that erodes logic. Torn, papered walls reveal other patterns underneath, like the accumulation of posterage on lampposts, or a midden of patterns recalled from adolescent graphic t-shirts, thrift stores, grandmother’s tablecloths and *Artforum* magazines. Sometimes paper is folded obesely, rolled into teetering ruins, or furrowed against a wall, the reflection of its colours engendering a painterly effect. Other times, the artists suspend it from ceilings, netted or drooping, or blanket it over shrink-wrapped spheroids that resemble crumpled pop art vases.

Combined with suggestive titles that are ambivalently inconclusive, this interplay of tropes traverses the categories of painting, printmaking, sculpture, graphic design, architecture and performance, all the while messing about with history – that enormous pile of history.⁴ In these installations, the structure of time and space becomes abstracted, directionless and stockpiled. This echoes our contemporary moment, where the endless ‘pages’ of Internet content allow the past to be continually, accessibly present, and where volumes of visual culture accumulate amidst the storm of the ‘new.’

Séripop’s installations maximize minimalism, taking the ubiquity of modern design around us (its tidy patterns and thwarted utopian ambitions) to hyperbolic excess.⁵ Ideas of decay, impermanence and failure are enacted through the works’ material tensions: the hovering cloaked forms with their fluorescent undersides (will they fall?), or the papered floor increasingly trodden and tattered from passers-by. Their manipulation of paper’s dimensionality, much like their strategies with sound,

allows ethereal matter to become physical – to take over space – however temporary this presence may be. The effect is visceral, embodied, and immediate: the cerebral is taken for a joyride.

Successive repetition is a key element throughout their process and resulting visual work. It is also persistent feature in the modes of production and material proliferation of late-capitalist society. In their use and re-use of automated-press, screen-printed designs – and their own physical process of making – the duo tap into the machinery of mass production, yet also frequently riff with existing resources to make things happen.⁶ The performance of their affective labour has a particular zaniness about it that is legible in their completed work: its bizarre, outlandish physicality and playful ‘scrappiness’ that undercuts convention. Literary critic Sianne Ngai has described the ‘zany’ as having “a special relation to affective or physical effort... an aesthetic whose dynamics are most sharply brought out in performance.”⁷ The work of Séripop is comical with serious underpinnings, not unlike the eponymous 16th century Italian *zanni*, an expressive and mischievous character whose mimicry of principal actors parodied society’s growing divisions of labour.

In her exploration of marginal aesthetic categories, Ngai asserts that these apparently ‘trivial,’ quotidian groupings are in fact the ones “best suited for grasping how the concept of ‘aesthetic’ has been transformed by the performance-driven, information-saturated and networked, hypercommodified world of late-capitalism.”⁸ With the waning of 20th century art’s ability to produce perceptual shock, capitalism’s swift appropriation of visual strategies, and the numbing tedium of routine everyday tasks, perhaps we are trapped in a sort of *Vexation*: a long, drawn-out series of suspended moments, with the myth of progress having dissolved amidst our cultural rubble. Perhaps all one can do is keep doing, *ad infinitum*. It may be a complicated process for a very simple outcome, but there is always that chance of breaking through patterns and unexpectedly shifting one’s perception.

- Joni Low

¹ Chloe Lum, in Jessica Mensch, “What’s All The Fuss About?” An Interview With Yannick Desranleau And Chloe Lum Of Séripop,” *Body Literature*, June 2013, bodyliterature.com/seripop.

² Sam Sweet, “A Dangerous and Evil Piece,” *The New Yorker*, September 9, 2013, www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2013/09/vexations-a-dangerous-and-evil-piano-piece.html.

³ Jessica Mensch, “What’s All The Fuss About?” An Interview With Yannick Desranleau And Chloe Lum Of Séripop.”

⁴ For example *Avances En Arrière* (a site-specific outdoor intervention in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Québec, in collaboration with Action Art Actuel, 2012), *En finir avec, sans aller au fond des choses* (Action Art Actuel, Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Québec, 2012), and *This Peculiar Bias Will Nonetheless Set Up A Vast Field For The Unforeseen* (Galerie Hugues Charbonneau, Montréal, 2013).

⁵ See Boris Groys’ summary of the project of modern design. Boris Groys, “The Obligation to Self-Design,” in *Going Public* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2010), 22.

⁶ Conversation with the artists, Access Gallery, January 4, 2014. See also Mensch’s interview in *Body Literature*, where they describe a certain can-do, ‘Black Flag-type’ work ethic in their practice.

⁷ Sianne Ngai, “Our Aesthetic Categories,” *PMLA* 125:4 (October 2010), 948 – 958. My thanks to Jordan Strom for initially pointing me towards Ngai’s work.

⁸ *Ibid*, 948.

BIOGRAPHIES

YANNICK DESRANLEAU AND CHLOE LUM live and work in Montréal. In their installations, sculptures, prints and other interventions, they explore how material entropy affects the readings of a given work, through the implementation of strategies displaying diverse forms of mechanical contingency. They have exhibited in Canada and abroad, notably at YYZ artists’ outlet (Toronto, 2013), The Blackwood Gallery (University of Toronto, 2012), Musée d’Art Contemporain de Montréal (Québec Triennial 2011), Kunsthalle Wien (Vienna, Austria, 2010), BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art (Gateshead, England, 2009), and Whitechapel Project Space (London, England, 2007). Their collaborative work has been acquired by many private and public collections, notably the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

JONI LOW is an independent curator, writer and historian based in Vancouver. She is interested in the relationships between visual art and language, and in art that exists beyond conventional exhibition spaces—art that continues to destabilize and create new understandings of the contemporary experience. Her writing has appeared in exhibition catalogues and in publications including *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *Fillip*, and *Yishu: Journal for Contemporary Chinese Art*. Joni has held positions at the Vancouver Art Gallery, coordinating the travelling exhibitions program; at Long March Space Beijing’s International Office; and at Centre A, as Gallery and Library Coordinator, where she developed a specialized public library focused on contemporary Asian art.

EVENTS

OPENING RECEPTION:
FRIDAY, JANUARY 10, 2014, 8PM

IN CONVERSATION: YANNICK DESRANLEAU & CHLOE LUM
WITH ACCESS GALLERY DIRECTOR/CURATOR KIMBERLY PHILLIPS
SATURDAY, JANUARY 11, 2014, 2PM

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