

LES CHOSES SONT CONTRE NOUS

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AKA GALLERY

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Exhibition Essay by Dagmara Genda

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AKA Gallery

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Les Choses Sont Contre Nous sounds like a heady reference to French theory à la the imported ideas of Jacques Derrida or Jean Baudrillard transferred often contentiously from literary theory to art criticism. The title translates to “things are against us” alluding to an opacity that is often attributed to theoretical discourse as well as to the exhibition’s subtle antagonism toward the viewer. After entering AKA by pulling a door labelled “push,” the viewer is greeted by a something resembling an obstacle course or construction site. The entrance is obscured by a short winding hallway that looks only half complete. It is a framework constructed of suspended two-by-fours adorned with safety tape making the viewer weave her way inside. Immediately, if playfully, the show resists you. It makes you work to get in.

The project is the collaborative effort of artists Bruce Montcombroux, Jason Sheppard and Kyle Beal. Beal lives in Montreal, Sheppard in New Jersey where he is currently completing his MFA at Rutgers University and Montcombroux, who organized the exhibition, lives in Saskatoon. The three met at the Vermont Studio Centre residency but only decided to work together after the fact. Despite certain connecting themes in their work, they make for an unlikely collaborative team. All three are rather solitary workers whose respective practices exhibit a marked level of self-sufficiency. For example, Beal’s recent exhibition, “Surveying the Danger Field,” partly consisted of drawings of stage curtains: specifically those in front of which Rodney Dangerfield performed. With the performer erased, an expectant spotlight is left to linger on the velvet cloth. Each successive drawing documents the searching movement of the light as it wanders across the curtains. In the same gallery space a drum-set is wired with motion sensors to respond to a passing viewer. The unsuspecting viewer does not know when he might set off a drum roll or rim-shot, either of which evokes a kind of slap stick finale without the punchline. There is a sad but also hilarious unpredictability to the piece. The viewer himself becomes the show, only to be indifferently mocked by an unmanned drum-set with a devious agency all its own.



Kyle Beal, *Untitled #5, Surveying the Danger Field*, 2010



Kyle Beal, *Surveying the Danger Field*, 2010

Sheppard's work has a similarly alienating sense of humour that, while not explicitly pushing away its audience, creates a self-sufficient environment wherein the viewer is rendered optional. This ambivalence between work and viewer is most elegantly exhibited in "Hold Hostage"--a hand-built record player whose needle is a Dremel. As simultaneously a device of labour and play, it engages the productively absurd task of both playing and destroying a library of "bad" records like Perry Como, Barbara Streisand and Bette Midler. The sound it produces oscillates between faithful renditions of the recorded songs, eerily tortured industrial noise or a commingling of the two. The "music" is often bearable for only short intervals as the indifferent machine continues its Sisyphean task of "playing" old albums despite its audience.



Jason Sheppard, *Hold Hostage*, 2008

In contrast Montcombroux's machines do not attempt to "do" anything other than engage the aesthetics of use itself. A work like "Modal Ski II" references early models of snowmobiles while simultaneously undermining that reference. It might be a one-of-a-kind beta model, a half-finished idea or something else altogether. In their meticulous fabrication, Montcombroux's objects imply purpose without ever revealing what that purpose is. The idea of use is ironically, and rather uselessly, reduced to a set of codes without referent. Lacking instruction manuals, the machines have no ready connection to the outside world. They sit on the gallery floor spotlight and uncommunicative like little understood relics in a museum display.



Bruce Montcombroux, *Modal Ski II*, 2009

How do three such solitary practices come to communicate with one another? How has collaboration impacted the artists' working methods? I asked this question in a talk presented before the exhibition. Beal humorously responded, "In a dictatorship decisions are made like that [he snaps his fingers] but in a democracy, it takes more time to come to a consensus." The almost antagonistic behaviour displayed in the collaboration started to make more sense. Just as the show might resist the viewer, an act of collaboration might be fruitfully understood as primarily

an act of resistance. Perhaps this is the true merit of democracy: not the consensus it is said to reach, a consensus that often pleases everyone just enough to please nobody at all, but its staging of a forum for resistance.

Resistance is indeed the uncontested theme of the show. The title, *Les Choses Sont Contre Nous*, comes not from French theory but from a spoof thereof. “Resistentialism” is a spoof of existentialism and an implicit critique of French theory. Paul Jennings, a British humorist, first coined the term in *The Spectator* in 1948 and later elaborated upon it in his brilliant and satirical essay “Report on Resistentialism.”¹ In brief, resistentialism claims that objects are hostile to humans and a war rages between them. Jennings’ fictional philosopher, Pierre-Marie Ventre, describes, in Sartre’s terminology, how the subject, torn at the seams between being a “thing-body” and a “mind” “cannot know the Other except as one of the weapons with which the World-Thing has increased its area of hostile action.”² The essay is filled with descriptions of everyday occurrences of malign “thing” agency like the tenacious will of buttered toast to fall face side down each time it is dropped. Jennings goes so far as to describe fictional resistentialist works of art, the most memorable of which might be the symphony written for conductors only.

Interestingly enough, Jennings’ satirical jabs at French thought and absurdist art sound very contemporary and even compelling. In a development that must have left him shaking his head in disbelief, his ideas have taken on a level seriousness in the form of “thing-theory,” which admittedly originates with the French but does not lack its British supporters.³ This new turn in materialism can be most readily attributed to Bruno Latour and Michel Serres who have developed similar approaches to thinking about and through things. The extra step that might be added to Jennings’ joke, and the step that is taken by contemporary thought about objects, is the primary difference between things and objects. As Bill Brown succinctly puts it, “We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us...”⁴ When the car stalls or the computer permanently crashes, objects are revealed in their irreducible “thingness.” As things they are harder to pinpoint and identify. They refer to the lack that cannot be filled, Freud’s *das Ding*, or the elusive word at the tip of one’s tongue—that “thingamajig.” The act of objects asserting themselves as things, says Brown, changes the relation to the human subject and reveals that the names we ascribe to an object are more accurately understood through a subject-object relation.⁵



Les Choses Sont Contre Nous, installation view, AKA Gallery, 2011



Les Choses Sont Contre Nous, installation view, AKA Gallery, 2011

Serres elaborates on this relation with the introduction of quasi-objects which are like objects in that they “instantiate social forms and processes that, without them, would be too fleeting to endure” but unlike objects they move and mediate between subjects.⁶ The clearest example might be taken from sports such as football or basketball, where subjecthood passes from person to person with the passage of the ball. Without the ball, the person is part of an anonymous mass that only comes into recognition through an object—the ball. Reciprocally, without the person, the ball is just an object. The subject-object relation that the ball mediates, however, makes it a quasi-object. This relation takes on more complex chains through daily life, through the things people ascribe meaning to and the objects they interact with. Money, legal documents, works of art, and even other people, can be quasi-objects that change the position and subjectivity of the individual relating to these objects. I would argue that *Les Choses Sont Contre Nous* engages these ideas not necessarily as something new but as something that is and has been at the core of art and image making.

Beginning with the prank of sticking a “push” label on a door that should be pulled, the viewer is confronted with his own assumption and ascription of meaning onto objects. After making one’s way through the initial 2x4 wooden framework one is confronted by examples of resistance in what is the most didactic part of the exhibition. A pile of toast sits atop a plinth with one piece lying face down on the white surface. A lonely sock is tacked to the wall amidst losing lottery tickets and photographs of Beal’s real broken zipper—an unfortunate mishap that caused him to wear his jacket open in the -30°C weather. The explanatory specimens lead up to a video projected on the back wall where Beal sits at a desk attempting to unsuccessfully write with a broken pen and then with a pencil whose lead always breaks before the completion of the first word.

The rest of the exhibition, however, tackles resistance in a more conceptual manner. At the back of the gallery hangs a small ball covered in orange tape, much like what you would hang in the back of your garage to signal the need to stop before hitting the oncoming wall. As the last thing you see in the show, the ball cheekily signals the end of the exhibition. Another work on display is a strange device which one might not recognize as the motion activated contraption used to open the garage door. Suspended from the ceiling just low enough to sit lightly on the floor, the awkwardly phallic object raises its long arm in the presence of an oncoming viewer and even sometimes knocks itself off the ground in excitement. Yet at

other times it remains stubbornly indifferent to the viewer's presence—usually when one specifically wants to set off the device. This piece, in conjunction with the exhibition's motley assortment of lonely objects, exhibits its hostility in rather stubborn if playful ways.

What this collection of objects emphasizes is the thinking through things that art has always accomplished and that Duchamp satirically exploited in his ready-mades. Art might be understood as an act of un-naming or un-representing objects or any “thing” we might take for granted or assume to have a stable, fixed value. Art becomes a confrontation with an object's thingness and the way we position ourselves in relation to it. It is no surprise, then, that art can still be contentious or controversial to a wider public. Its thingness eludes classification, makes the viewer engage in a battle, an act of positioning that does not always have a conclusive end. It resists the viewer and demands a new subject-object relation that is not pre-written or already classified. Moreover, as the fickle motion-sensing object emphasizes, it is one that might change from viewer to viewer without necessarily losing its objectivity.

Les Choses Sont Contre Nous might be interpreted as a proposal for a new form of materialism and not necessarily one that precludes theory. Instead it questions forms of idealism and theoretical jargon removed from material itself. This form of materialism, rather than championing empirical evidence or a sort of environmental determinism, is a materialism of relations where things do not represent a solid ground but an unstable shifting foundation. In this sense Montcombroux, Sheppard and Beal do not propose to answer how objects might function but push our understanding of these very objects into yet more uncertain territory.

- 1 Elster, Charles Harrington. “Resistentialism.” *The New York Times*. September 21, 2003.
- 2 Jennings, Paul. “Report on Resistentialism.” *The Jenguin Pennings*. 1963.
Reprinted from *Town & Country* (USA). <http://www.resistentialists.com/2006/01/25/report-on-resistentialism/> Accessed: 13 February 2011.
- 3 See Steven Connor's “Thinking Things,” a lecture given at the 9th annual conference of the European Society for the Study of English in Aarhus, Demark, August 25, 2008.
<http://www.stevenconnor.com/thinkingthings/>.
- 4 Brown, Bill. “Thing Theory.” *Critical Inquiry*. 28, 1 (Autumn, 2001), 4.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Connor, Steven. “Thinking Things.” a lecture given at the 9th annual conference of the European Society for the Study of English in Aarhus, Demark, August 25, 2008.
<http://www.stevenconnor.com/thinkingthings/>. Accessed: 13 February 2011.

Biographies

Bruce Montcomroux is a practicing artist currently living and working in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where he graduated with an MFA from the University of Saskatchewan in 2007, and now teaches sculpture and extended media as a sessional instructor with the Department of Art and Art History.

Montcombroux exhibits nationally and internationally to a lesser extent, and has been the recipient of grants and awards (most recently a Saskatchewan Arts Board Independent Artists Grant). In addition, he has participated in artist talks, panel discussions, and conducted workshops. Montcombroux has also attended the Banff Centre residency program, the Vermont Studio Center residency program, and the NES Artist Residency in Skagaströnd, Iceland.

Jason Sheppard was born in Denver Colorado in 1986. He was raised in a liberal middle class family in the suburbs where punk rock and revolutionary politics were an early influence on him. He chose to develop his interest in the connection between the aesthetic and theoretical worlds and doubled majored in sculpture and philosophy at the University of Colorado at Boulder (graduating in 2008) and is currently in the process of completing his MFA Degree at Rutgers (planning on graduating in 2012). Sheppard has shown nationally and internationally in venues such as Mason Gross Gallery in New Brunswick NJ, VERTIGO Art Space in Denver CO, and The University of Colorado at Boulder Art Museum. He currently lives in the fantastically underrated state of New Jersey.

Kyle Beal is a Montréal based artist represented by Galerie PUSH, his work has been featured in exhibitions throughout Canada, including the Glenbow Museum in Alberta and the Contemporary Art Gallery of Vancouver. He holds a Master's degree in visual art from the University of Victoria.

Dagmara Genda is a Polish-Canadian artist who also writes. She currently lives in Saskatoon, SK where she serves as Editorial Chair for BlackFlash magazine. She's regularly contributed to BlackFlash, has published in Locus Suspectus Magazine as well as written catalogue essays for Forest City Gallery and AKA. As an artist, she has exhibited internationally and is currently working towards her debut solo show in NYC for 3rd Ward in the summer of 2011. Genda holds an MFA from the University of Western Ontario and an MRes in Cultural Studies from Birkbeck College, University of London.

