

Controversies about Public Contemporary Art: An opportunity for Studying Viewer Responses

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Abstract

Unlike other types of public art, works of public contemporary art are often the subject of controversy. This paper examines two examples of public contemporary art: one controversial (A & B associés, *Transformer Site*, 1982), the other not (John Ceprano's Ottawa River stone sculptures, 1987). To understand the developments that led to these different outcomes, the two case studies are examined using three different approaches. First, by presenting various viewers' points of view as expressed in newspaper articles and letters to the editor, the author explores public opinions about A & B associés' *Transformer Site* (1982) in terms of the social class aesthetics of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1980). Second, the author examines how additional factors, such as education and viewing experience, also shed light on viewer reactions to works of public contemporary art. Third, consideration is given to the role of the media in influencing public opinion about the two art projects. The author argues that, in the case of John Ceprano's stone sculptures on the shores of the Ottawa River, the media's coverage of the production of these works is an example of art education on a massive scale. The article concludes with a discussion of Vincent Lanier's (1987) argument that freedom of aesthetic choice can only truly exist when viewers have informed access to works of art.

Resumé

À l'encontre des autres types d'art public, les œuvres relevant de l'art contemporain sont souvent sujettes à controverse. Le présent document porte sur deux exemples d'art contemporain : un controversé (A & B associés, Transformer Site, 1982) et l'autre non (les sculptures de pierre de la rivière Ottawa de John Ceprano, 1987). Pour mieux saisir le cheminement à l'origine de ces deux productions, deux études de cas des approches utilisées sont proposées. L'on découvre en premier lieu les divers points de vue exprimés par le biais d'articles de journaux et de lettres à l'éditeur. L'auteur analyse l'opinion publique vis-à-vis l'œuvre Transformer Site d'A & B associés (1982) en fonction de l'esthétique des classes sociales proposée par le sociologue français Pierre Bourdieu (1980). L'auteur se penche ensuite sur l'incidence de facteurs autres, tels qu'éducation et expérience de visualisation, sur la perception qu'a l'observateur de l'art contemporain. Troisièmement, l'auteur étudie l'influence des médias sur l'opinion publique face à ces deux projets artistiques. L'auteur prétend, en ce qui concerne les sculptures de pierre de John Ceprano, érigées sur les rives de la rivière Ottawa, que la couverture médiatique de cette production est un exemple probant d'éducation artistique à grande échelle. L'article se termine par une analyse de l'argument de Vincent Carlier (1987) voulant que le choix esthétique libre n'existe que lorsque l'observateur s'ouvre aux œuvres d'art de manière éclairée.

Introduction

It is not surprising that so many well-intentioned efforts to introduce the public to works of contemporary art have failed. Can simply exposing the public to contemporary art constitute in itself a positive and formative experience? Rather, educational experiments consisting of commissions of art for public places or the installation of contemporary art in public spaces such as parks¹ often fail. Instead, many such attempts have only served to confront and challenge the public's values and sensibilities and, as an unintended outcome, give voice to the angry expression of a preference for other types of art less contemporaneous in form and content.

Recently, in my own professional practice, I have turned my attention to researching viewer responses to public contemporary art². Furthermore, I use public controversies about contemporary art as case studies³ in my university art education courses because they are a rich source of primary information about viewers' responses and opinions related to contemporary art. These case studies provide opportunities for students to consider such responses directly and carefully. In the process of doing so, students gain a better understanding of what motivates viewers to respond in certain ways to certain types of art.

This article provides an example of information that can be gleaned from a careful examination of a public controversy to works of contemporary art. The paper focuses on two works of art presented in public outdoor spaces. First, I will examine public opinion about these works and discuss the points of view expressed in newspaper articles and letters to the editor in terms of social class aesthetics by referring to the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984). Second, I will turn my attention to issues of education and examine how art learning and viewing experience may also explain aspects of the public reaction to these two works. To a lesser extent, I will also examine the role of the media in influencing public opinion about the works and, in one of the case studies, how the media's presentation of the art project in question may be considered a positive, supportive and, perhaps, even an educational intervention in favor of that project.

Two Public Installations, Two Reactions

In this paper, two case studies provide a focus for a discussion on controversies related to public contemporary art. The first case study examines an event that took place in 1987 during a summer heat wave. Under the leadership of artist John Ceprano, Remic Rapids on the Ottawa River (in Ottawa, Ontario) became the site of the construction of a number of stone sculptures. People from various walks of life visited the site and participated in the erection of the stone structures partly in response to the fairly intense, positive media attention focused on this event. The second case study focuses on a sculpture entitled "Transformer Site". This work was commissioned in 1982 by the

Municipality of Ottawa (Ontario) to adorn an outdoor courtyard adjacent to the newly constructed Ottawa Police Station. The unveiling of the commission in 1983 was met with a public outcry and the ensuing controversy was fuelled in large part by the feverish attention paid to it by the local media.

The Remic Rapids Sculptures

In 1987, the Remic Rapids sculptures numbered anywhere between 50 to 75 individual stone sculptures. They lined the shallows of the Ottawa River shore in the general area of the Little Chaudière Rapids. More specifically, at the site of Remic Rapids where the natural geology and morphology of the riverbed has provided ideal conditions – low water levels, a slow moving current, an abundance of material in the form of stones of all shapes and sizes – the sculptures clustered in large numbers creating an impressive sight, especially when their discovery was unexpected. Because of their numbers, the structures could be seen from a distance. Their presence at this site appeared both eerie and magical. All of the sculptures made use of the materials at hand, namely stone, water, and, occasionally, driftwood or branches. The technique of construction was the same throughout; none of the stone had been transformed using tools or instruments. Rather, the sculptures were built simply by piling, wedging and balancing the available stones one upon the other. The large stone slabs of exposed riverbed often served as the foundation or the pedestal of the sculptures. In other cases, the large slabs of rock delineated an area within which a number of components were set to form one overall much larger and more complex structure. The sculptures, except for a rare few, were abstract. This was no doubt a reflection of the unyielding quality of the stones used to construct them. The material at this site is not malleable; it does not readily lend itself to realistic representations. Many of the sculptures on the site were the work of John Ceprano who initiated the project at Remic Rapids in 1987 (*The Ottawa Citizen*, August 13, 1987, p. B1). Although working full time as an orderly at Elizabeth-Bruyère Hospital, Ceprano considers himself an artist. He also paints and takes photographs. Each summer since 1987, Ceprano returns to the Remic Rapids site to begin anew the experience of constructing the stone

sculptures. He now devotes more of his time to art making and was awarded a Canada Council Grant in 1989 in order to pursue his interests full-time as a professional artist (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, May 12, 2001). However, since the very beginning of the project in 1987, Ceprano has been joined in the activity of creating these cairn-like structures by many others who do not necessarily consider themselves artists in the professional sense: sunbathers, fishers, and passers-by. There is a bicycle path as well as a four-lane parkway nearby. The site, therefore, is readily accessible. Initially, a lot of interest in the sculptures was generated by local journalists who discovered the work in early August 1987 and reported on it in many televised newscasts as well as, to a lesser extent, on radio and in the press. People began to visit the site out of curiosity and, once on the site, began to spontaneously join in on the art making.

Transformer Site

Transformer Site (1982) is the work of two professional artists, René-Pierre Allain and Miguel Berlanga, who worked together as creative partners in Ottawa between 1981 and 1985 under the name "A & B associés". The sculpture was commissioned for the courtyard of the new Ottawa Police Station following an adjudicated competition in which nine artists presented proposals for sculptures and murals for the new station (*The Ottawa Citizen*, August 19, 1982). *Transformer Site* was realized using reinforced concrete and structural steel. In keeping with the artistic concerns of their previous work, the partners' *Transformer Site* is the representation of a 20th Century industrial complex as it would appear as a ruin to archeologists in the distant future. In referring to *The Core Island Complex* (1984), A & B associés describe their thematic concerns as follows:

[Our sculptures] depict the monumentality of industrial architecture, the materiality (weight and resistance) of its construction materials (such as steel and concrete), the reality of these materials' decay, the mysteriousness of the still, nearly lifeless industrial ruins, and the narrative of the archeological explorers, A & B associés, who recover them....

Finally, the work offers a dispassionate representation of the relationship between society and its material support, the earth. It is about 20th century industrial-military world as a world of transformation. (1984, no pagination)

If, at first glance, *Transformer Site* might appear as an abstract work of art, closer study of the piece reveals that it realistically represents a former industrial structure, now in an advanced state of decay. Great care has been taken in the conception of the piece to make each component relate to the other structures of the work, not only in formal terms but in functional ones as well. One can readily visualize how different parts of the ruin must have played a role in supporting a common structure, such as a pipe or a piece of machinery, now since long gone. One can imagine how different the site would have been in its heyday, with all the noise, the smells, the visual clutter, the activity (both human and mechanical) and, indeed, the dangers that one readily associates with a contemporary industrial complex. Not only is *Transformer Site* in a state of ruin, as indicated by its rusting steel and crumbling concrete, it is a ruin being reclaimed by nature. Areas of the sculpture are now overgrown by weeds; some parts, contrary to their initial functions, now act as basins where rainwater can collect.

The realism of this sculpture may have contributed in part to initial confusion about its identity and purpose within the wider context of the construction site of the new Ottawa Police Station. Both structures — the new station and the commissioned sculpture — were under construction simultaneously and, therefore, some people initially thought that the structures of the sculpture had something to do with the construction of the Police Station itself. As reported in *The Ottawa Citizen*, "Marika Keliher thought the concrete and iron collection of forms, called *Transformer Site*, was the beginning of the heating and ventilation system for the new Station". "It looks like it should be carrying a load" another passerby, Elizabeth Austen, was quoted as saying. "Gotta be something added to it" was the assessment of one construction worker. (*The Ottawa Citizen*, April 6, 1983). And, so began the first of several cycles of public criticism of *Transformer Site*. Each cycle was interspersed with artists' and artists associations' attempts at defending the piece and the aesthetic standards it was upheld to represent. Since then, criticism of the piece has waned and then flared up again a number of times. There was still talk in

1987— four years after the unveiling — about getting the piece removed from the site.

A First Explanation for the Public's Reaction

The fact that the public was likely to react so negatively to the commissioned work, *Transformer Site*, should not have been a surprise either to the artists, the jury who selected the work for the Station, and even the various art associations who eventually spoke out in its defense. Rather, it can be argued that such reactions should have been anticipated and perhaps could have even been predicted, as they are a frequent occurrence in situations where the public at large is invited to view and judge a work of art whose theoretical foundations are deeply rooted in a professional aesthetic. The tenets of such an aesthetic are largely unknown and somewhat foreign to most of those outside of the professional art milieu. The work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1980) is very useful, in this instance, in coming to understand the basis upon which the public rejected the work of A & B associés. It can be seen that the public's judgment was based on the principles of what Bourdieu has described as a "popular" or "working-class" aesthetic.

When confronted with legitimate works of art, people most lacking the specific competence apply to them the perceptual schemes of their own ethos, which structure their everyday perception of everyday existence. These schemes, giving rise to products of an unwilling, unselfconscious systematicity, are opposed to the more or less fully explicit principles of an aesthetic. The result is a systematic "reduction" of the things of art to the things of life, a bracketing of form in favour of "human" content.... (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 246)

Bourdieu's Paradigm

In order to better demonstrate how Bourdieu's paradigm is useful in clarifying and understanding aspects of the controversy surrounding *Transformer Site*, I

will first present the main features of Bourdieu's paradigm of a working-class aesthetic. Then, I will paraphrase explanations for each feature taken from Bourdieu's own work and, in some cases, add comments of my own. Finally, I will quote examples taken from newspaper clippings to demonstrate how some viewers used the criteria proposed by Bourdieu in their comments about the installation, *Transformer Site*.

To Fulfill a Function

The first feature of a popular aesthetic, as defined by Bourdieu, is that "working-class people ... expect every image to fulfill a *function*" (1980, p. 244). Accordingly, every image is deemed to have a purpose, a reason for its existence, just like a building is intended to shelter people or a chair is to sit in. An image communicates a message (a sign), presents a likeness of a subject (a portrait), advertises a product (a billboard), and so on. This is a rejection of Art for Art's Sake, "a denunciation of the arbitrary or ostentatious gratuitousness of stylistic exercises or purely formalistic experiments" (p. 244). The following are examples, from newspaper accounts relating viewers' comments about *Transformer Site*, that illustrate this expectation that art should have a function.

Elizabeth Austen vacillated between two images. "It looks like it should be an ornamental fountain and water should be pouring out of it. It also looks like it should be carrying a load." (*The Ottawa Citizen*, April 6, 1983)

After studying the sculpture, I suddenly realized why it looked so familiar. On a visit out west ... we were taken to a ranch in the Alberta foothills and placed in front of just such an object. The structure turned out to be a giant outdoor barbecue pit where two steers were being roasted on spits. (Alfred Papineau, Letter, *The Ottawa Citizen*, April 14, 1983)

... may we ask what it really is? (Hazel Levere, Letter, *The Ottawa Citizen*, April 21, 1983)

Ottawa Mayor Jim Durrell still doesn't know what the controversial sculpture outside the Elgin Street Police Station is supposed to depict. (Hugh Adami, *The Ottawa Citizen*, Dec. 21, 1985)

Norms of Agreeableness.

The second characteristic of a popular aesthetic is that working-class people "refer to norms of morality or agreeableness in all their judgments" (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 244).

Thus the photograph of a dead soldier provokes judgments which, whether positive or negative, are always responses to the reality of the thing represented or to the functions the representation could serve, the horror of war or the denunciation of the horrors of war which the photograph is supposed to produce simply by showing that horror. (p. 244)

In the following citations, viewer comments about *Transformer Site* support Bourdieu's notion that working-class people base their judgments about works of art on a standard of agreeableness.

Perhaps the artists should take heed of what the majority of Ottawans think and start creating sculptures that will be more appealing to the majority of people. (Paul Hardy, Letter, *The Ottawa Citizen*, Dec. 21, 1985)

Ottawa Mayor Jim Durrell: "Nobody I've spoken to is enthusiastic about that thing". (Hugh Adami, *The Ottawa Citizen*, Dec. 21, 1985)

If the majority ... don't like it or can't comprehend it, can it be art? (Michael Babin, Letter, *The Ottawa Citizen*, April 21, 1983)

Inherent Beauty

The third feature of the paradigm is that beauty as a concept or idea is inherent in the object being represented (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 244). Therefore, a photograph of a beautiful person is deemed to be a beautiful photograph. A painting of a repulsive scene is deemed to be repulsive. Industrial sites, in particular, are seen as having no inherent beauty, and therefore a work like *Transformer Site* is necessarily judged negatively. The following comments about *Transformer Site* demonstrate this propensity.

Nor does it take an artist to tell someone that a piece of "art" is an absurd, visual eyesore." (Paul Hardy, Letter, *The Ottawa Citizen*, April 21, 1983).

Some residents, especially those living around the police station, thought it was pretty ugly. (Hugh Adami, *The Ottawa Citizen*, Dec. 21, 1985)

A Conditional Aesthetic

According to Bourdieu, a fourth feature of the working-class aesthetic is that "this aesthetic, which subordinates form and the very existence of the image to its function, is necessarily pluralistic and conditional" (1980, p. 244). Judgments often refer to the possible uses or target audiences of a visual representation. "As a new photo, it's not bad" and "all right, if it's for showing to kids." (p. 244). The following comment by a reader of *The Ottawa Citizen* clearly exemplifies the conditional nature of such judgments.

... a fun thing for lost kids to play in where the police could keep an eye on them till the parents claimed them...or a great place to play hide-and-seek ... I think it would look better in a park. The kids would enjoy it. (Hazel Levere, Letter, *The Ottawa Citizen*, April 21, 1983)

A Non-universal Aesthetic

A fifth aspect of the paradigm is that this aesthetic rejects the notion that an artistic representation can please universally. It is always understood that some will find a representation appropriate and, therefore, likeable while others will not. "A photo of a pregnant woman is all right for me, not for other people", said a white-collar worker (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 245). Once again, published remarks about *Transformer Site* reveal these presumptions concerning the non-universal appeal of works of art.

Ottawa Mayor Jim Durrell: "I agree art is a very personal thing But really, rusty pipes and chipped concrete?" (Hugh Adam, *The Ottawa Citizen*, Dec. 21, 1985)

Are Ottawa's artists and the city officials who purchased it concerned about beauty and the public or only with impressing each other with how "with it" they are in relation to abstract art? (Michael Babin, Letter, *The Ottawa Citizen*, April 21, 1983)

Hypothetical Judgment

The sixth feature of the paradigm proposed by Bourdieu is that working-class aesthetic judgments take the form of a hypothetical judgment that in almost 75% of the cases begins with an "if". "The image is always judged by reference to the function it fulfills for the person who looks at it or which he [or she] thinks it could fulfill for other classes of beholders" (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 245). As illustrated by the following two excerpts, this approach for formulating an aesthetic judgment was the method favored by one Ottawa Citizen reader for the purposes of presenting an argumentation against the commissioned work, *Transformer Site*.

If it [art] is seen as the artists' means of communication through some medium (whether painting, sculpture or music) with the public, then the "language" used must be understandable to that public. (Michael Babin, letter, *The*

Ottawa Citizen, April 21, 1983)

If the majority of those who observe the police station sculpture don't like it or can't comprehend it, can it be art?
(Michael Babin, letter, *The Ottawa Citizen*, April 21, 1983)

Classification by Genre

Finally, the seventh and last feature of Bourdieu's paradigm is that the working-class aesthetic experience "culminates in [the] classification [of the object being contemplated] into a genre" (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 245). Consider these examples: "It's a publicity photo". "It's a pure document". (p. 245) Other examples of classifications might include categories like portraits, landscapes, abstracts, and so on. When it came to judging *Transformer Site*, some viewers used classification as a strategy for clearly summarizing their opinion about the artistic value of the commission. Here are two examples.

... such junk-art atrocity. (Robert-Guy Chênevert, Letter, *The Ottawa Citizen*, April 21, 1983)

... abstract art? (Michael Babin, letter, *The Ottawa Citizen*, April 21, 1983)

A Coherent Public Response

The preceding section of the paper has served to demonstrate how the various features of Bourdieu's paradigm of a working-class aesthetic can be identified in several viewers' comments about *Transformer Site*. This analysis demonstrates that the members of the public in question reacted in a coherent and intelligible way to the challenging visual experience presented to them by A & B associés. However, the analysis also makes clear that this particular viewing public was judging the work using criteria from a distinctive aesthetic framework – one that features its own mode of aesthetic perception and understanding – that is different from the aesthetic model that the artists, René-Pierre Allain and Miguel Berlanga (A & B associés), referred to as they

conceptualized, constructed and, later, defended their work. For example, René-Pierre Allain, in an attempt to explain how the artists' concerns in creating the installation were different from those of the public, was quoted as stating that: "People don't have to understand a piece but they should try to. We make beautiful sculpture, but not necessarily sculptures of beautiful things" (Lynn McAuley, *The Ottawa Citizen*, April 12, 1983). This comment appears to be a direct reference to the one specific criteria of aesthetic judgment presented earlier in which beauty, as a concept or idea, is deemed to be inherent in the object being represented. Allain's comment makes clear that the artists' point of view contradicts that of the segment of their public that wrote letters to the editor. Allain's comment also alludes to the aesthetic and artistic concerns that the work attempts to address, namely the depiction of "the reality of these materials' decay, the mysteriousness of the still, nearly lifeless industrial ruins, and the narrative of the archeological explorers, A & B associés, who recover them" (A & B associés, 1984, no pagination). By inviting their viewing public to project themselves into a distant future, to a time where today's industrial buildings are no longer in use, have crumbled and decayed, the artists hope that the public will join them in the challenges and pleasures afforded by playing the imaginary role of archeologists attempting to reconstruct in their minds the original structures. They are inviting their viewers to contextualize the ruins. It is likely these aesthetic and artistic concerns, and not the formal appearance of the ruins, that make the work "beautiful" from the point of view of the artist, René-Pierre Allain.

Refining the Initial Premise

It would seem that the artists, on the one hand, and the public, on the other hand, were proceeding in their appreciation of *Transformer Site* using ways of aesthetic comprehension that had little or no common ground: each faction was guiding their thinking on the basis of cognitive prototypes that focused on different features and yielded different kinds of information.

Before I can conclude that the public's reaction to *Transformer Site* can be deemed to support Bourdieu's paradigm of a distinctive "working-class" aesthetic, a careful examination of the sources of the comments cited is in

order. The analysis conducted in the previous section is based, in part, on the assumption that the comments used as evidence of the existence of each feature of the paradigm are from actual members of the working-class. The sources used — newspaper articles and letters to the editor — do not provide the information necessary to make this verification. However, it is safe to assume that Jim Durrel — the Mayor of the City of Ottawa in the mid-1980s — is probably a middle-class, white-collar worker. It is also probable that those readers of *The Ottawa Citizen* who wrote letters to the editor about *Transformer Site* are just as likely to be members of the middle-class as they are to be members of the working class. I am also tempted to ask exactly what kind of a reader would take the time to write their local newspaper about this topic, if not one with an existing interest in such questions. These uncertainties cast a doubt on the validity of my analysis as specifically representative of a *working-class* aesthetic. Part of this dilemma may be related to some confusion that exists about the precise definition of the term "working class". However, it should suffice to mention that Merriam Webster's Dictionary defines the term "working class" as "the class of people who work for wages usually at manual labor" (1993, p. 1364). I believe that this use of the term is widely accepted. Interestingly, when referring to aesthetics, Bourdieu uses the term "working class aesthetic" almost interchangeably with "popular aesthetic" (1980, p. 244). However, use of the epithet "popular" to qualify the noun "aesthetics" appears to yield a much broader, less restrictive category than the term "working-class aesthetic". The alternate term — popular aesthetic — may be more appropriate and more useful for the purposes of this paper. The word "popular" is widely understood to mean "adapted to or indicative of the understanding and taste of the majority" and also to mean "frequently encountered or widely accepted" (Merriam Webster's Dictionary, 1993, p. 906). Substitution of the term "middle-class aesthetic" with the alternate term "popular aesthetics" leads me to embrace the wider meaning conveyed by the new term. I can now confirm that the citations used as evidence in this case study originate from a frequently encountered point of view and that, indeed, this point of view is representative of a "popular aesthetic". This repositioning of my frame of reference allows me, once again, to assert that Bourdieu's paradigm of a popular aesthetic provides a good explanation of the documented viewer responses to *Transformer Site*.

This clarification of my original position allows me to move towards a consideration of other factors, in addition to social class, that might be related to art viewing activities. Let me be clear: I am not trying to dismiss Bourdieu's claim that social class confers a certain entitlement in relation to cultural capital (i.e. knowledge and skills) required to understand and appreciate art and culture (1980, p. 226). Nonetheless, I cannot overlook the fact that it is impossible to conclude (with any degree of certainty) that the viewers, whose criticisms of *Transformer Site* were quoted in the case study, are uniformly members of the same class, let alone the working class. It is far more likely that they represent a much broader spectrum in relation to origins in social class. Furthermore, it must also be acknowledged that they responded in a surprisingly consistent manner to the work of art under consideration. This consistency in response strongly suggests a common denominator related, at least in part, to one or more other factors. Bourdieu admits that cultural capital is a product not only of social origin but also of education. Furthermore, a careful reading of the following citation reveals that Bourdieu acknowledges that education is *the most important factor* in determining cultural practices, while social origin ranks second.

This led us to establish two basic facts: on the one hand, the very close relationship linking cultural practices (or the corresponding opinions) to educational capital (measured by qualifications) and, *secondarily* [emphasis added], to social origin (measured by father's occupation) and, on the other hand, the fact that, at equivalent levels of educational capital, the weight of social origin in the practice — and preference — explaining system increases as one moves away from the most legitimate areas of culture (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 226).

It can be argued that, in some cases, educational capital is the only readily identifiable factor to explain a high level of involvement in cultural and artistic practice. According to a survey conducted by Statistics Canada in 1994, this is certainly the case for a large percentage of Canadian cultural workers. Cultural workers are highly trained and educated: approximately 45 per cent of them hold a university degree, while for the labor force as whole, the

percentage of workers with a university degree is only 15 per cent. In term of their incomes, artists' earnings compare more closely with those of unskilled laborers, not with those of a university-educated workforce. "The average artist made \$25,400 in 1993 ... Painters and sculptors are at the bottom of the heap; they made a scant \$14,100" (Little, 1996). However, the fact that most artists earn low incomes does not cancel out social origin as a factor in determining cultural practices: artists can start out in life as the children of upper-middle or upper class parents. Nonetheless, in terms of their professional incomes, artists have more in common with the working-class than with any other income group. Education, then, cannot be discounted: it is an important factor and probably a very likely explanation when considering the factors that play a determining role in any person's successful involvement in cultural and artistic activities.

The apprehension and appreciation of the work also depend on the beholder's intention, which is itself a function of the conventional norms governing the relation to the work of art in a certain historical and social situation and also of the beholder's capacity to conform to those norms, i.e. his or her artistic training. (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 235).

In this respect, I disagree with Bourdieu. Although an education in the arts is more likely to provide the specific art-related skills that are useful for understanding and appreciating a wider range of types of visual art, a general post-secondary education can provide a good foundation for the general appreciation of works of art.

General analytic and interpretation skills play an important role in aesthetic experiences with works of art. Such skills can be developed by engaging in a variety of different kinds of experiences, not just those linked to the arts. If a viewer has a basic command of such skills, a little additional information about an art object may increase the chance of a successful outcome during an aesthetic encounter. In other words, a formal education in the visual arts is not absolutely essential for good art viewing experiences. A little additional information may be all that is required to assist a somewhat skilled non-expert viewer in successfully interpreting works of art. Attitude may also play a role in

regard to the outcome of an art viewing experience. A positive attitude on the part of the viewer probably increases the likelihood of a rewarding art viewing experience.

For the sake of argument, the example offered by the Remic Rapid sculptures provides an opportunity to explore some of these points without necessarily coming to a definitive and final answer. To this end, I pose the question: Why weren't the Remic Rapids sculptures more controversial? In many ways, they resembled the commissioned work *Transformer Site*. The materials used in the two projects were different: stone in the first instance and concrete in the second. Yet, the formal characteristics of the materials were similar: in both cases, the stone and concrete are massive, rigid, heavy and unyielding. In both instances, mainly one material is used. The Remic Rapid sculptures were constructed by combining various components, all consisting of stone, whereas *Transformer Site* is equally made up of various individual elements constructed using mainly formed concrete. One major difference lies in the fact that the sculptures at Remic Rapids were made simply by re-arranging ready-made components supplied by nature. Although they were abstract, they seemed to refer to nature because of the natural origins of the material and because of their contextual setting: a river. *Transformer Site* is, on the other hand, extremely processed and industrialized: the imprint of industrial operations is rather evident within the structure. Contrary to the Remic Rapids pieces, *Transformer Site* is not abstract: it simply looks that way when first encountered. It is unquestionably a realistic depiction of an industrial structure. The artists have rendered it very carefully and accurately as a representation of a potential reality set in a distant future: that of a contemporary industrial structure as it could eventually appear in a state of ruin. The processes used to make the sculpture are actual industrial processes and the sculpture bears the marks left by these techniques. These fabrication methods contribute considerably to the realism of the piece.

An Additional Explanation

An important factor differentiating the two sculptural projects may very well be the artists' intentions in undertaking their respective projects. *Transformer Site*

is a statement by professional artists about concepts that are of concern mainly to professional artists and their immediate public. An enormous investment in terms of time and energy has gone into the production of this artwork. It is a relatively expensive realization (\$20,000) funded by the taxpayers' money. The procedures and techniques of its construction are complex and not easily understood by most people. Finally, it is intended as a permanent structure. It is doubtful that it could be removed or dismantled without being destroyed in the process.

The Remic Rapid sculptures were, on the other hand, quite different in their intention. Although certainly intended as works of art by John Ceprano, initially these structures came about rather spontaneously, without either a great deal of fanfare or premeditation. Ceprano has described how he spontaneously began to rearrange the stones at the Remic Rapid site one summer's day in 1987 and, having found this activity both creative and invigorating, decided to do it again the following day (CBC, 2001). The techniques and methods of construction are simple. The pieces are made by piling and rearranging the rocks. They cost very little to produce and were never intended to be permanent. Ceprano "knocks down his own creations when he tires of them and builds new ones in different shapes" (Drolet, 1987).

Related to this idea of differences in the artists' intentions is another consideration: the types and quality of relationships that the artists established with collaborators before, during, and after the art production process.

Becker's Paradigm

Sociologist Howard Becker (1982) proposes that art making involves not only the artist but also an entire network of people whose activity is essential to the production and success of an aesthetic object or event. This network may include artists, technicians, and promoters, but it also includes audiences. Becker refers to the collaborative network required to produce art as an "art world" (p. 1). Each art world is distinctive and is defined by its creative intentions, aesthetic objectives, artistic conventions, and cooperative structures.

By referring to the terms of reference of Becker's sociological paradigm, I

looked at the creative activities and cooperative networks of the artists involved in the two case studies. This scan reveals that A & B associés and John Ceprano established very different art world structures to support their creative activities. This may explain why each artistic undertaking met with different types of success and why one in particular, John Ceprano's project, earned the favor of the public, while the other did not.

In undertaking their artistic project, A & B associés' objectives were quite specific. They had to meet the contractual obligations that come with a juried public art commission. To achieve this goal, they surrounded themselves with a network of collaborators that consisted mainly of other professionals. For example, they worked closely on planning the project with the architect of the Ottawa Police Station, whose building their sculpture was going to adorn. They also worked in close contact with an engineer to ensure that their work would meet building codes as well as certain technical restrictions. For example, *Transformer Site* is actually located on the roof of an underground parking garage and, therefore, careful consideration had to be given to the overall weight of the structure. In order to avoid potential conflicts on the work site, work on the sculpture had to be coordinated with the ongoing activities of several construction contractors. The work of constructing the sculpture itself was very labor intensive and, therefore, A & B associés called upon the assistance of several friends, most of whom were also professional artists. In sum, the completion of this project required that A & B associés develop an extensive network of collaborators. Due to the technically and artistically complex nature of this undertaking, A & B associés created a network that consisted mainly of various professionals. These collaborators joined the network only upon receiving an invitation from the artists. The day-to-day activities of this network were regulated by the conventions of a typical, professional work environment. These conventions include consultation with peers, adherence to professional standards (i.e. the building codes), compliance with work schedules, implementation of conflict avoidance and safety procedures, and respect of others' expertise and their professional boundaries.

In contrast, John Ceprano's network of collaborators was very different in both its structures and conventions. Unlike the very structured art world created out of necessity by A & B associé, John Ceprano's art world was informal and

organic. Initially, the Remic Rapids sculptures were an individual enterprise. However, as interest grew in Ceprano's activities at the Remic Rapids, others spontaneously joined in the art making activity. No invitation was required. By all accounts, Ceprano welcomed the participation of strangers and passersby. His art world was open, flexible, adaptable, and adhered to few conventions. There was no schedule to respect, no deadline to meet, no taxpayers' dollars to account for, and no regulations to comply with. Another interesting factor is that these sculptures were not monuments but, instead, human in scale. In addition, the art making techniques were simple and within most persons' existing abilities. The materials were manageable in terms of size, weight, and availability. These characteristics made it possible for others to join Ceprano in the experience of creating these sculptures. This shared experience promoted an intimate understanding of the Remic Rapids structures through a process of public participation and involvement. Public participation also resulted in a sense of community among those taking part in this unusual creative activity. In a real sense, John Ceprano educated his public in two ways: first, through his very public example of an artist actively engaged in a creative activity and, second, as a willing mentor to several impromptu apprentices. The public's participation in the project blurred the traditional distinction between artist and audience. In a sense, the participants could rightfully make a claim to both of these conventional roles. For these reasons, it is not surprising that the general public reacted so positively to the Remic Rapids sculptures. In the end, it is likely that Ceprano and the other participants developed a shared sense of ownership of these sculptures. Becker would certainly agree with this conclusion.

Works of art, from this point of view, are not the products of individual makers, "artists" who possess a rare and special gift. They are, rather, joint products of all the people who cooperate via an art world's characteristic conventions to bring works like that into existence. (Becker, 1982, p. 35)

The Media's Contribution

In the final analysis however, it is probably the role that the media has played in promoting understanding of and public involvement in the Remic Rapids sculptures that may have made the difference in the public's acceptance of this work. Initially portrayed in terms of an unusual summertime activity — with sunbathing, swimming and fishing as important concomitant activities to sculpture making — the sculptures initially received short, light-hearted but repeated attention from the electronic and print media. When public involvement in the project grew along with the number of sculptures dotting the river's shore, the phenomenon began to receive more in-depth reporting, first on television news and later in the other media. Reporting began to focus on the structures as works of art. All of the television and radio reports that I witnessed⁴ were very positive in their treatment of this news item. Only one newspaper article seems to attest to a reporter's failed attempt to create or stir up controversy on the subject: "Geoff Nix of the Ottawa River Regulating Committee chuckled when asked whether it was OK for anyone to build cairns in and along the river. — I can't see that anybody would object — he said, adding that he thought the Cairns add something to the river" (Drolet, 1987).

The role of the press, radio, and television in reporting the events surrounding the unveiling of *Transformer Site* qualitatively was quite different. It is fair to criticize the media as being less than neutral in their treatment of the Ottawa Police Station art commissions. A mural that had also been commissioned for the interior lobby of the station received little attention. All the reporting by *The Ottawa Citizen* focused on the criticism leveled at the sculpture *Transformer Site*, and not on any other aspect of the project. Articles seemed aimed at feeding whatever initial reticence there may have been about the work. In one edition, *The Ottawa Citizen* even grouped letters to the editor on the subject of the sculpture in one section under an attention-getting headline. People who had not seen the sculpture, but who were reacting instead to what they had read in the same newspaper wrote many letters to the editors of *The Ottawa Citizen*. The television reporting that I can recall on the subject also focused mainly on the growing controversy: it was clear that, had there not been an initial negative public reaction to *Transformer Site*, the unveiling of the commission

would have gone unreported. The local artists and art associations that spoke out in the defense of the work only added fuel to the controversy by reacting in a defensive manner to the public's criticism of the sculpture.

Jennifer Dixon, a member of the Royal Academy of Art and a vocal member of the local arts community, said she was "fed up" with putting up with the "uneducated opinions" of people who were denouncing public art.... "The decision on this piece was made and should have been made by people who know art and the direction it's taking, not by visual illiterates" (Lynn McAuley, *The Ottawa Citizen*, April 12, 1983).

Understandably, Jennifer Dixon's comments alone added fuel to the debate that lasted for some time. Her call to impose and uphold the professional art world's standards over the opinions of the public only served to further entrench the point of view of both sides in this debate.

It is obvious that the media has played an important role in the public's acceptance or rejection of the two works of art examined in this paper. In the instance of the Remic Rapids sculptures, the media was instrumental in promoting an understanding of the work by focusing its reporting on those elements of the event that the public was likely to comprehend and connect with, namely the therapeutic and playful aspects of the project. In our society, ongoing industrialization has given rise to a popular belief that the processes of industrialization (with its costs and benefits) contradict the ideals of organic life (such as, for example, harmony with nature). The events surrounding the production of the Remic Rapids sculptures exploit this conflict by providing a focus and a venue for the expression of the popular pleasure that is taken in getting back to nature and celebrating it. By astutely identifying this concern as the main focus of its reporting, the Ottawa media encouraged and promoted a public celebration of nature through involvement in the art making activities at Remic Rapids. This, then, is another key to understanding the success of the Remic Rapids sculptures as a widely celebrated event.

The media was also successful in unearthing some of the deeply ingrained issues embedded in *Transformer Site*. This time, the result was a loud and

boisterous debate about the merits of the sculpture. Like the Remic Rapids sculptures, *Transformer Site* addresses but also challenges our beliefs about industrialization and organic life. *Transformer Site* confronts our belief in the deep-seated notion of progress through the ongoing expansion of industrialization. However, in *Transformer Site*, a less than desirable outcome is presented to viewers, one that they simply cannot celebrate. Nature is seen to prevail over mankind. Nature reclaims the architectural artifacts of the industrial revolution through a process of gradual but inevitable decay. This decay sets the stage for its triumphant return as nature begins to occupy, and restore to vegetation, the spaces made available by the disintegration of once massive and imposing industrial structures.

It can be argued that in the case of the *Transformer Site* commission, *The Ottawa Citizen* played an important leadership role in identifying, channeling and, indeed, encouraging a negative evaluation of the sculpture. A review of media coverage of this event reveals a penchant for an unfavorable treatment of the project that began in the very early stages of reporting about the project. After that, the media's criticism appears to escalate with each subsequent article or report. This pattern reveals a familiar strategy for covering events that are potentially contentious. The controversies surrounding the National Gallery of Canada's 1990 acquisition of Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire* (1967) and the 1991 exhibition of Jana Sterbak's *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorexic* (1987) developed in a similar fashion. The print and electronic press often attempts to encourage and fuel controversies about contemporary art, as well as other topics, as a means to increase readership and audience ratings. During the last 15 years, the media has often targeted contemporary art because the marginalized status of contemporary art makes it extremely prone to misunderstanding and, thus, a fertile ground and easy mark for controversy.

Whereas the media's role in championing criticism of the work of A & B associates can be described as a negative and divisive strategy that, in the end, led to a confrontation between the artists and the community, the same media's role in promoting understanding and participation in Ceprano's Remic Rapids sculptures can be seen as a positive and integrative example of art education on a grand scale. The Remic Rapids experience demonstrates

that it is possible to bring contemporary works of art and the public together with positive outcomes. It is reasonable to expect that a well planned and well implemented educational program can result in a better appreciation, understanding, and mutual respect of the point of view of others, whether those "others" are artists or members of the viewing public.

My ongoing research lends support to this point of view. My current research project consists of a three-year study (2001-2004) of fifty non-expert viewers' responses to works of public contemporary art (Lachapelle, R. & Douesnard, M., in press). Research interviews are conducted using the sculpture garden in René-Lévesque Park⁵ in Lachine (a suburb of Montreal, Quebec) as a research site. In the course of this study, I have witnessed a few instances in which non-expert viewers — those with no professional training in the fine arts — have categorically rejected works of contemporary art. However, early findings demonstrate that this occurs far less often than one would expect. At this point in the research project, it appears that, under certain conditions, non-expert viewers do quite well in responding to works of contemporary art⁶. These conditions are: (i) that the viewers have the freedom to select the works of contemporary art to which they will respond; (ii) that the viewers take the time (at least five minutes) to look at the works of art very carefully; (iii) that the viewers have at their disposal additional information about the works of art. In the case of the sculpture garden in question, extended labels that provide information about the works and the artists who made them accompany all the works of art.

Freedom of choice is certainly an important consideration when attempting to unravel why some works of contemporary art are controversial while others are not. As public entities, and by virtue of their installation in busy public areas, commissioned works of public art can be understood to limit the public's right to choose the art objects with which they will interact. Public works of art almost always exist as a result of decisions made by others with little or no input from the public for which they are intended. It is understandable that in situations where one is reminded daily of an unwanted presence, that such a presence can become irritating. Eventually, if one is unable to avoid encounters with that object, then the object may eventually be interpreted as an unwelcome imposition.

I agree with Vincent Lanier (1987) when he equates democracy in art with the issue of freedom of aesthetic choice. Lanier argues that freedom of aesthetic choice is "closely related to the idea that the primary purpose of art education is to provide informed access to works of art" (p. 176).

In the absence of adequate information, there is no freedom of choice in any context ... We can only be said to be free to choose when we know something about the alternatives from which the choice is to be made. Obviously, the act of *imposition* ... denies freedom of choice. On the other hand, the failure to provide adequate knowledge also denies freedom of choice. We must accomplish the second without being guilty of the first. (p. 177)

In cases where controversies about contemporary art erupt spontaneously and, then, are fuelled by the media's rush to exploit the situation, the provision of adequate information about the work of art and its historical and theoretical contexts is often forgotten or drowned out by the rhetorical frenzy that a growing controversy tends to generate. Neither the artists' call to uphold and defend a cherished professional standard, nor the public's categorical rejection of a work of art seemingly meaningless can serve as a basis for a genuine resolution. Only a willingness to learn, a readiness to explore and appreciate the value in someone else's point of view have the potential to lead to us to a better understanding and, with that, the freedom of informed aesthetic choices.

Notes

¹ One such event comes readily to mind. In 1982, the Canada Council's Art Bank placed minimalist sculptures in Ottawa's Mile Circle Park located in Rockcliffe Park Village, one of the National Capital's wealthiest neighborhoods. Local residents protested against the installation of the sculptures in their park, labeling them as a form of visual pollution. Ongoing protests led to the vandalization of some of the sculptures; one was even removed from its base and thrown into the adjacent Ottawa River. Eventually, the Art Bank conceded defeat and removed the sculptures from the park.

² In 2002, I began a study of the responses of fifty non-expert adult viewers to works of public contemporary art located in René-Lévesque Park in Lachine, Québec. These

works are part of a larger collection of public contemporary art owned by Musée de Lachine.

³ For example, I have created case studies for use in both undergraduate and graduate courses based on controversies such as that created by the acquisition in 1990, by the National Gallery of Canada, of Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire* (1967). A second example is a case study I created based the controversial exhibition in 1991, also at the National Gallery of Canada, of Jana Sterbak's *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorexic* (1987).

⁴ During the period of time that concurs with the two events addressed in this article, I was living and working in Ottawa. Furthermore, I had knowledge of these events as they developed and, from the perspective of a participant-observer, witnessed and followed these ongoing events directly and with a great deal of interest.

⁵ The research project is funded by a three-year FRSC (Fonds de la recherche sur la société et la culture) research grant.

⁶ The collection includes the work of prominent Canadian artists such as Michel Goulet, Bill Vazan, Mark Prent, and Robert Roussil, as well as several international artists such as Catherine Widgery (USA), Takera Narita (Japan), and Miroslav Maler (Czech Republic) (Pitre, 2001; Chalifoux, 2001). With the exception of one sculpture by Hugh Leroy (dated 1967), all of the sculptures were produced between 1985 and 1997. All are permanent installations.

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