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Armand Vaillancourt's Social Sculpture.

John Grande

**A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Art History**

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
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ABSTRACT

Armand Vaillancourt's Social Sculpture.

John Grande

As an artist committed to social and cultural change, Armand Vaillancourt considers his art to be a tool in generating social transformation. The monumental projects he has produced over the years, as much as his performances are not only an end product, but are equally vehicles for engendering controversy and social dialogue. Vaillancourt's image as an avant garde artist is parenthetical to his art which has seldom been looked at in any depth though it has generated a lot of media attention. His *bois brûlés*, and *The Tree of Durocher St.*, reflected a search for interiority through materials. *Québec Libre* and *Je me souviens* were both abstract and monumental, but the aesthetic is structural yet the process embodies principles of speed and scale. The rapport between structure and materials, between architecture and monumental sculpture emerges at the same time as his political manifestations and happenings. Vaillancourt's perception of the role of the public monument is classical, in that it embodies values of permanence, but his political gestures advocate social change. This thesis presents a chronological overview of Vaillancourt's public sculpture, from *The Tree of Durocher*, his first, to his most recent, *Song of the Nations*.

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INTRODUCTION

Armand Vaillancourt's contribution to the history of modernist sculpture in Quebec is undeniable. His bois brûlé and abstract cast metal sculptures from the 1950s and 1960s, many of which are represented in Canadian museum collections, are unquestionably some of the most innovative formalist abstract sculptures made in Canada at the time. Yet Vaillancourt has occupied an uneasy position in the history of Canadian sculpture, particularly because of his political involvement and separatist aspirations which remain pure and distant from former Quebec Premier Parizeau's small "c" conservatism; he still regrets René Lévesque giving up in 1984 what he calls the "beau risque". When Vaillancourt was offered the Governor General's Award in 1967, he refused, but it had already been mailed to him and on receiving it, he kept it. Such dichotomies are constant in Vaillancourt's political positioning.

Vaillancourt's career as an artist has certainly had high and low points. His work is largely known of in fragments, not as a composite whole. Indeed, in English Canada he is primarily known for the fiasco over the City of Toronto's refusal to install *Je me souviens* in 1967, due to the titling of the piece. As a leftist who firmly believes that art is a force that can raise social awareness, even catalyse social transformation, he is likewise part of a minority in Quebec, itself a minority in Canada. He is a constant fighter for freedom and the rights of individuals, yet also a Quebec nationalist. As such his position is interesting. Little of this is known to English Canada. Largely ignored by the museum and public art gallery establishment, his abstract sculptures from the 1950s and 1960s are in most major Canadian museum

collections. He is a fascinating contradiction. Now 67 years old, he has never been given a solo show by a major museum nor has he represented Canada at such events as the Venice Biennale or Documenta in Germany. Despite this, few artists have had such extensive media coverage as Vaillancourt, more for the controversy he arouses and the image of the artist he presents than for the aesthetic of his sculpture. Because of the controversial nature of his career, there is virtually no comprehensive assessment of Vaillancourt's social sculpture over the years. It all appears in fragments to the public, an article here, a feature there, or mere hearsay. Legends are born and die with the media, but in this thesis, I hope to present an overall look at Vaillancourt's life and art, so as to provide some new insights into the process of his artistic practice.

I will endeavour to present the work as it was made, largely in chronological order, including his monumental sculptural interventions such as *Monument aux Morts* (1958), *Je me souviens* (1967), *Québec Libre* (1967-71), *La force* (1964), *El Clamor* (1985-87), *Drapeau blanc!* (1987), and *Song of the Nations* (1996).

The social and cultural values Vaillancourt propounds through his art: nationalism, defense of human rights, political prisoners, women's rights, and ecology, appear all the more ambiguous these days. The public sculpture, performances, happenings Vaillancourt enacted in the 1960s were part of a broader atmosphere of artistic, social and cultural liberation, but times have changed. Vaillancourt's early preoccupations were as much spiritual as aesthetic. His innovations with Styrofoam casting and bois brûlé in the 1950's are important, not only for the process and materials

used, but also for the rapport between these techniques and the aesthetic language Vaillancourt developed as a result. His sculptures offer an affirmation of a somewhat naive, even colonial attitude to culture and artistic discourse even as they embrace a social aesthetic of liberation and all that avant-gardism implies. The context is very important in this respect. His decision to remain in Quebec as an avant-gardist, despite offers to go abroad, and his insistence on the rights of the individual within a social matrix, on protecting minority rights while remaining a separatist, will also be seen as symptomatic of a Québécois identity fraught with historical incertitude. The notion of permanence embodied by the monument is now questioned, above all by artists. This is all the more evident in the international forum, particularly in Europe, where the lessons of history are not colonial, but imperial. The same is true as regards the aesthetics of art. Many artists now distrust notions of permanence in art, precisely because it mitigates against further social transformation. Vaillancourt's art leads one to such central issues of aesthetics and nationalism, the monument's relation to modernity and postmodernism.

ARMAND VAILLANCOURT'S SOCIAL SCULPTURE

Born at 122 rue St. Denis, Black Lake in the Eastern Townships on September 3rd, 1929, the 16th of 17 children, Armand Vaillancourt grew up on a 300-acre farm with no electricity or indoor toilet.¹ He was the son of a former trade unionist and prospector who had opened several mines.² During the Depression, his father bought the Black Lake farm to ensure the family's security in hard times.³ A variety of artistic influences undeniably played a role in the formal language of Vaillancourt's sculpture, yet he still maintains that the predominant influence on the abstract language of sculpture stemmed mainly from his rural childhood and farm life in the Eastern Townships.⁴ In an interview published in February 1969, Vaillancourt states:

I really liked my life on the farm. But don't think that it was an easy life. I learned about hard work. Not in comfort. We lived in a really primitive fashion. My first experiences of the abstract were at home, in our living room, on the piano. In the dark. After supper. (...) I invented sounds.⁵

¹ Winston McQuade, *Juré Craché* (Montreal: Alain Stanké/Radio Canada, 1996) 214-219.

² Denise Boucher, "Vaillancourt à la conquête de San Francisco," *Perspectives* 1 Feb. 1969, 15.

³ Boucher, *Perspectives*, 15.

⁴ Vaillancourt, personal interview, 31 July, 1997.

⁵ Boucher, *Perspectives*, 15.

In the late 1940s, Vaillancourt worked on boats on Lake Memphremagog,⁶ as well as on the Great Lakes and at sea, voyaging to South America, Labrador, the Gulf of Mexico and New York.⁷ At the age of 19, after his family sold their farm, he seriously considered such a career. On one such trip, Vaillancourt and one other sailor discharged a cargo of bronze ingots for 53 hours without stopping.⁸ As a teenager, he hitch-hiked across the United States, visiting city after city, and claimed he covered some 100,000 miles during his travels. "I did not visit them (the cities), I washed them (with my eyes) , street by street, building by building."⁹ Throughout his career, and in public comments, this poetic sense of infinite scale surfaces, not only in his work but also in his descriptions of life and experience. In 1949 and 1950, Vaillancourt took classical studies at the University of Ottawa and began premedical studies. Not at all happy with his chosen direction, he left to spend nine months in solitude in the Eastern Townships during which time he spoke to no one, reflecting on his future. It was then he chose to move to Montreal and in 1951, decided to enrol in the Ecole des Beaux-arts where he studied art until 1954. During the years 1953-54, he became President of the Student Association at the Ecole des Beaux-arts, not only for the Fine Arts but also for Architecture.¹⁰ One of his teachers there, Alice Nolin told him "I think you're good in colour, but you'll never

⁶ Winston McQuade, *Juré Craché*, 226.

⁷ Armand Vaillancourt, personal interview, 31 July 1997.

⁸ McQuade, 216.

⁹ Guy Fournier, 27.

¹⁰ Armand Vaillancourt, personal interview, 30 July, 1997.

become a sculptor."¹¹ When working in drawing class developing his own language of forms, he would apply so much force his pencil would literally go through the paper.¹² In this early period Vaillancourt did religious studies as well as traditional classical works, eventually moving into pure abstraction.

Borduas' *Refus Global* (1948) and Pellan's *Prisme d'yeux* group, formed the same year in reaction to the Automatists, marked the beginnings of a truly modernist experience in Quebec art. In the realm of public sculpture, it was the works of Robert Roussil and Armand Vaillancourt, dated between the years 1949-1955, that truly signified the beginnings of modernism in Quebec monumental sculpture. Their monumental works can be contrasted with the small format carvings and sculptures of Paul-Emile Borduas, Anne Kahane, Charles Daudelin and others, which likewise evidenced the emergence of modernism on a more modest scale. As sculptors who worked on a large scale in three dimensions, they were well disposed to work towards a social sculpture, particular as these works had an actual physical presence and could be witnessed and talked about by the public outside the usual art gallery, museum and studio venues. Denise Leclerc, in her assessment of Vaillancourt's oeuvre for the exhibition *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s*, acknowledges Vaillancourt's seminal place in the history of Canadian sculpture, stating:

¹¹ Armand Vaillancourt, personal interview, 30 July 1997.

¹² Denise Boucher, *Perspectives*, 14.

Armand Vaillancourt is quite likely the sculptor who did the most to focus attention on monumental public sculpture in the 1950s. He often made headlines in Quebec and elsewhere with his diverse projects, and even managed to break out of the art pages into the rarefied air of the main section of the paper.¹³

When Paul-Emile Borduas' *Projections Libérantes*, largely an account of his own education in art, his life's struggle as an artist and his career and success as a teacher, finally appeared in print in April 1949, Borduas' health was failing. As Ray Ellenwood comments: "We can see signs of a shift of focus (...) Claude Gauvreau and his younger companions were becoming more active, more autonomous."¹⁴ Although Vaillancourt maintained no active ties with the Automatists, he nevertheless played the role of a doctor in a one-act farce titled *La mort de monsieur Borduas* (The Death of Mr. Borduas). The play was written in 1949 by Jacques Ferron, himself an outsider to the Automatist group. In the play, funeral preparations are underway for Mr. Borduas who is thought to have committed suicide in Muriel Guibault's car by drinking various brightly coloured pigments. Designated roles in Ferron's play included Françoise Sullivan, Claude Gauvreau, Jean Lefebvre and Jean-Paul Mousseau. In the

¹³ Denise Leclerc. *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992) 200.

¹⁴ Ray Ellenwood, *Egregore: The Montreal Automatist Movement*. (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1992) 158.

final scene Borduas enters with Muriel Guilbault, very much alive. While the Automatists Barbeau, Gauvreau, Riopelle, Perron and Leduc were represented in the play, they did not participate in the performance, and were instead represented by Lefebure and Vaillancourt.¹⁵ As the play's theme suggests, changes were taking place in the Montreal's arts scene. As part of an independent group of artists, Vaillancourt was well placed to sense these changes.

When he initiated *The Tree of Durocher St.* in 1953, Vaillancourt effectively brought a dying city tree back to life and reconfigured it as an artwork. He worked on this monumental wood sculpture on Durocher St. just above Sherbrooke St. West in Montreal, cutting, carving, burning, and sculpting with burners, hand tools and an axe. Now in the collection of the Musée du Québec, *The Tree of Durocher St.* became a performance that lasted two years. As Vaillancourt worked out of doors before crowds of onlookers, the spectacle caused his name and reputation to spread. In an article titled *Aventures et Méaventures des Sculptures Environnementales au Québec 1951-1991*, Guy Sioui-Durand refers to Vaillancourt's *The Tree of Durocher St.* as the single work that signified the beginnings of modernity in Quebec sculpture.¹⁶ Robert Roussil's *La Famille* (1949) predates Vaillancourt's work for controversy but remains an essentially figurative sculpture with elements of abstraction. Lise Lamarche more generally

¹⁵ Ellenwood, 159-160.

¹⁶ Guy Sioui-Durand, "Aventures et Méaventures des Sculptures Environnementales au Québec 1951-1991," *Recherches sociographiques*, XXXIII - 2 (1992) 208.

credits both Vaillancourt and Roussil as the first modernist sculptors in Quebec, followed soon after by Louis Archambault and Charles Daudelin.¹⁷ Some time after the work's completion, in 1957, the Russian sculptor Ossip Zadkine, associated with the early days of Cubism in Paris, visited Canada for an exhibition of his own work. On witnessing Vaillancourt's sculpture, he knelt before it and declared it to be the work of a master. When Zadkine invited Vaillancourt to come and work in Paris, Vaillancourt refused, preferring to stay in Quebec. *The Tree of Durocher St.* remained at its original site until 1969 when it was moved to La Ronde on Ile Notre-Dame. It remained there until August 1976 when it was sold to the Musée du Québec for \$26,000, whereupon it was installed near the brasserie Le Gobelet on rue Saint-Laurent in Montreal.¹⁸ It is now permanently located on the grounds of the Musée du Québec.¹⁹

The Tree of Durocher (1953-55) initiated a phase of environmental sculpture, which could be called art for the public, that predominated in the 1960s in Quebec as elsewhere. This brand of social sculpture and art was made by the artist without state intervention, sometimes to critique the state's control of the arts or simply as a spontaneous gesture. By the 1970s, art as social statement had become

¹⁷ Lise Lamarche. "De la Statue à la Sculpture," Michel Martin and Gaston Saint-Pierre, *La Sculpture au Québec 1946- 1961: Naissance et Persistance*. (Québec: Musée du Québec, 1992) 114.

¹⁸ "Armand Vaillancourt vend son 'arbre' - \$26,000," *Photo Journal* 22 Aug. 1976, 7.

¹⁹ Armand Vaillancourt, personal interview, 31 July 1997.

recognized by art institutions, and as such the original impetus of such work itself became more institutionally oriented. Many of the same artists who critiqued the institution now found their work in the permanent collections of art museums and public galleries, and Vaillancourt was no exception.

Within Quebec's own Catholic traditions, there has been a history of public sculpture, albeit with religious themes. Louis Jobin's *Notre-Dame du Saguenay* was created in 1881 and installed in a niche 506 feet above Cap Trinité on the Saguenay River. Jobin's lead-covered pine sculpture was, for its time, the largest sculpture in wood created in North America, weighing 7,000 lbs. and standing twenty five feet tall. Commissioned by Charles-Napoléon Robitaille, the work was paid through a popular fund raising campaign that had patriotic proportions. Its installation compelled a railway of trees to be constructed in the forests over which the huge sculpted blocks were dragged upwards by horse with block and tackle from ledge to ledge. Jobin's ice sculptures for the Quebec Winter Carnivals of 1894 and 1896 represented famous figures from Quebec's history: Monseigneur François de Laval, Frontenac, Father Jean de Brébeuf and Champlain. A colossal statue of *Liberty Lighting up the World*, again weighing 7,000 lbs. and standing 16' 6" high, was a faithful reproduction of Frederic Auguste Bartholdi's *Statue of Liberty* (Liberty Enlightening the World, 1886) in New York Harbour. Working out of doors in the cold, Jobin invented his own set of shears to cut the ice without shattering it.²⁰ As events that attracted crowds during their production, and

²⁰ John K. Grande, "Louis Jobin (1845-1928)," *Espace Sculpture* 6. 2 (Winter 1990) 9-10.

for their emphasis of scale, Jobin's ice sculptures were a kind of performance or public event not unlike the making of Vaillancourt's *The Tree of Durocher St.* Likewise Jobin's wood sculptures of agricultural themes for the St. Jean Baptiste parades can be considered a kind of public sculpture linked to Quebec's populist rural and agricultural traditions.

Transformation of material in Vaillancourt's sculpture involves aspects of movement, volume, weight and mass. The actual scale of the forest, landscape, or city site, plays a role in his work. Vaillancourt's physical approach to sculpture *as process* (the mechanical chainsawing, the drilling of holes and the burnings witnessed in his totemic bois brûlé sculptures from the 1950s, the large scale on site castings such as *La force* (1964) and more architectural and structural commissions in concrete such as *Québec Libre* and *Justice*) is a physical violence that both depend upon and use material *en masse* to achieve a given effect. This physical approach approximates, in the sculptural process, values inherent to outdoor work in primary resource industries such as forest and outdoor labour. Vaillancourt's principal of *direct action* and his use of materials *that have been experienced and are now being transformed* parallels Joseph Beuys social *aktionen* and sculpture/installations. But Vaillancourt's identification with labour and the land is also part of the traditional rural Catholic values associated with *la terre* in Quebec, echoed in such novels as Ringuet's *Trente Arpents* and Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*. Rural values that emphasized the family, the land, the forest, and church persisted in Quebec until the Second World War, even despite the fact that industrialization and urbanization had already radically transformed Quebec society. They were as much a part of Vaillancourt's upbringing as

they were for Paul-Emile Borduas. In his writings such as the *Refus Global* Manifesto (1948) Borduas, the leader of Quebec's Automatist movement in painting, not only envisioned a new abstract purpose for artistic expression, he also urged Quebecers to break out of the straitjacket of tradition and presaged Quebec's Quiet Revolution.

Abstraction as a process may be no more conceptual than figuration in that figuration requires a process of identification, recognition and re-figuration during the act of painting. Yet Vaillancourt's sculptural abstraction was not just the pure abstract formalism so many 1950s and 1960s artists' works embodied. Yves Robillard commenting on Vaillancourt's work in *Confrontation '65*, the international sculpture symposium held at the Botanical Gardens in Montreal, states:

In the most general sense of the expressive potential of materials, Vaillancourt seems to me to be the one who has taken the adventure the furthest: bois brûlé, iron, wax, antlers, Styrofoam ... and now cement. "

Vaillancourt's approach to sculpture in the early years generally involved an exploration of the inherent properties, characteristics and essence of matter in the materials he used. While he had little contact with the Automatists, or even with his professors at the Ecole des Beaux-arts

²¹ Yves Robillard, *Confrontation '65* (Montréal: Association des Sculpteurs du Québec, 1965,) np.

in the early 1950s, notions about abstraction were "in the air". Abstraction was presumed by many artists of the era to provide a closer liaison between human emotions, feelings and working material than figuration. In his personal notes, Vaillancourt evokes some sense of the universal potential abstraction promised to artists of the era:

To express these times, we felt we needed a style that was tense, explosive, mysterious, and altogether new. In the search for this style, young artists drew further and further away from the protocol of realistic forms. These, we felt carried "excess baggage", conventional meanings that got in the way of what they were trying to communicate. More and more, we turned towards abstract shapes and free-flowing colours to express intangible aspects of experience, things that are felt or known but cannot be seen.²²

A wide open show in May 1953 including over eighty artists' works was held at Place des Arts, the studio Robert Roussil and Armand Vaillancourt shared at St. Catherine and Bleury Sts. with Jacques Huet and Roland Diné. Despite its reputation for innovation, Place des Arts did not allow women to work in the space.²³ Yet Vaillancourt would later introduce

²² Armand Vaillancourt, "Personal notes on theory and technique," Vaillancourt studio files, ca. 1955, np.

²³ Lise Lamarche, "De la Statue à la Sculpture" in Michel Martin and Gaston Saint-Pierre, *La Sculpture au Québec 1946- 1961: Naissance et Persistance* (Québec: Musée du Québec, 1992,) 114.

Françoise Sullivan to the practice of metal sculpture by demonstrating arc-welding techniques to her in 1959.²⁴ In an interview with Gérald Godin published in *L'art et l'état*, Robert Roussil described Place des Arts as a kind of worker's university comprising people from all milieus, "a revolutionary adventure".²⁵ Indeed, one of the founders of Place des Arts, along with Roussil and Vaillancourt, was Michel Gagnon, a union organizer and the Head of the Communist Party of Quebec.²⁶ Events such as the May 1953 show evidenced the extent to which, as innovative sculptors of the era, Vaillancourt and Roussil (who had been a teacher at the Ecole des Beaux-arts) were active catalysts for new expression in the Montreal arts community of the 1950s. Vaillancourt was Vice-President of the Association des Arts Plastiques à Montréal which he co-founded with Robert Roussil in the Spring of 1956.²⁷ Poetry, jazz, performance, teaching and artistic ventures of many kinds took place with great regularity at Place des Arts. The May 1953 exhibition included some 350 works by artists as far ranging as Jean McEwen, Guido Molinari, Goodridge Roberts, Fernand Leduc, Marcelle Ferron and Paul-Emile Borduas. The art critic Rodolphe de Repentigny considered it to be the first show organized by artists to surpass

²⁴ Denise Leclerc. *The Crisis of Abstraction in Canada: The 1950s* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992) 186.

²⁵ Denys Chevalier, Pierre Perrault and Robert Roussil, *L'art et l'état* (Ottawa: Parti Pris, 1973) 12.

²⁶ Armand Vaillancourt, personal interview, 22 May 1997.

²⁷ Armand Vaillancourt, Artist's information form, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1958, np.

the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts' annual Spring Show in importance.²⁸ When Place des Arts was closed by police under the infamous Duplessis Padlock Law and sanctioned by Camilien Houde, mayor of Montreal at the time, it was, in Roussil's own words, because :

They said we were using it for subversive purposes, that we were funded by Moscow. We were all involved in the fight against Duplessis and worker's rights, and we used to have lectures by people like Jean Gascon (later artistic director of the Stratford Festival and National Arts Centre). Not only did they close us down, but they took the name of the studio when they built Place des Arts.²⁹

Some 22 years ago, Vaillancourt wrote that cultural revolution must precede economic and political revolution. He goes on to state that: "Capitalism is contrary to human nature. The cultural revolution must, in a sense, precede the economic and political revolution. But it will not be possible without the goodwill of the people."³⁰ Vaillancourt's point of view

²⁸ Sandra Paikowsky, "Vivre dans la cité: Quebec Abstract Painting," *Achieving the Modern: Canadian Abstract Painting and Design in the 1950s* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1993) 42.

²⁹ Nick auf der Maur, "Creating Controversy is a habit for sculptor," *The Gazette* 15 May 1985: A-2.

³⁰ Armand Vaillancourt, Personal essay, Vaillancourt studio files, ca. 1965, p. 8.

was no different from Robert Roussil's in the period of the mid-1960s. The *Quiet Revolution* in Quebec orchestrated from above was now being challenged, and a popular grassroots *mouvement populaire* arose that advocated *animation sociale*.³¹ Michel Martin, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Musée du Québec, commenting on the beginnings of modernist public social sculpture in the Quebec of the 1950s, an art that embodied these principles in art much a decade earlier states:

Roussil and Vaillancourt were the first to bring modern sculpture into the public sphere and, in so doing, to present a different aspect of monuments than those we were used to seeing. They described their works as interventions in the public domain; this kind of expression is, in a way, a kind of awareness of the public and social arena. Social discourse can be made in this way. It can also be more subtle and integrated in the work of art. Without being a public work, it is a work that has content, a social bearing.³²

In *L'art et l'état*, published in 1973, Roussil extended the principle that art must express social concerns, by affirming the artist's independent position in relation to the instruments of the state, a point of

³¹ Marc Raboy, *Movements and Messages: Media and Radical Politics in Quebec*, trans. David Homel (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1984,) 25.

³² Carl Johnson, "Naissance et Persistance: La sculpture au Québec de 1946 à 1961," *Espace Sculpture* 19 (Spring 1992) 44.

view both he and Vaillancourt shared at the time:

The artist cannot but be a permanent contestator of all forms of state (whether based on private enterprise or socialism) and cannot really exist except in the bosom of confrontation between the established society and him or herself.³³

Indeed, the subject of Roussil's book, art and the state, was precisely the theme of a pan-Canadian Conference of the Arts in 1973, and it brought Roussil and Vaillancourt together again in public, though their careers had moved in different directions.³⁴ As activist artists, they had already adopted a cultural as opposed to economic vision of society as early as the 1950s like many artists, both in Quebec and the rest of Canada. Art was perceived by many to be propagandistic by nature, and this was not considered a negative thing. In accepting this precept, cultural expression was believed to be part of the social dynamic of the body politic, art as public expression.

In 1958, when Vaillancourt created the sculpture *Monument aux Morts* for the City of Chicoutimi in the Saguenay-Lac St-Jean region, the piece aroused a great deal of controversy but primarily for aesthetic, rather than political reasons. Consisting of a multiplicity of cut metal pieces

³³ Denise Chevalier, Pierre Perrault and Robert Roussil, *L'art et l'état* 8.

³⁴ "Vous, les arts et l'état," *Loisirs plus* Feb.-Mar. 1973: 24-27.

welded together into an assemblage of repetitive, succeeding component forms that had the general look of a military cannon, but on closer examination revealed a tendency towards complete abstraction, *Monument aux Morts*, unlike the *Tree of Durocher St.*, focussed on the real world phenomena of human conflict and war. In an unpublished essay on Vaillancourt, Yves Robillard suggests that the abstraction of Vaillancourt's Cenotaph "could evoke vegetal growth with the aggressivity that a birth requires, or the more general aggressivity of a fight for life, in war for example."³⁵ At the inauguration of *Monument aux Morts*, standing in front of the military authorities who attended the event, Vaillancourt declared he was opposed to military violence.³⁶ The completion of a sculpture leads to theatrical spectacle time and time again in Vaillancourt's art. It becomes an occasion for social sculptural manifestation, for voicing social concerns.

As Vaillancourt's career progresses, and the materials he uses change from wood to bronze, then steel and concrete, their purpose also changes. Organic materials, such as wood, generally express an interiority, reflection, even inherently spiritual notions such as truth to materials. An early *Untitled* wood sculpture from the collection of the Musée du Québec, dated 1953, has a simplicity whose reductive aesthetic could be called minimalist, though minimalism only came into being in the 1960s. Vaillancourt's treatment of the sculpture as object causes the viewer to

³⁵ Yves Robillard, *Unpublished Essay*, Vaillancourt studio files, Montreal, ca. 1963, 11.

³⁶ Yves Robillard, ed., *Quebec Underground 1962-72*, vol. 1 (Montreal: Editions Médiart, 1973) 35.

reference the surrounding space as well. A smooth cylindrical section of a tree trunk with a thin open section running down its length has a central hollowed out core that repeats the exterior form. Two other *Untitled* totemic pieces, dating from the late 1950s and presented in the recent exhibition *La Sculpture au Québec 1946-1961* at the Musée du Québec, already have a rough geometry in their surface carving.³⁷ While Denise Leclerc dates Vaillancourt's beginnings in welded metal sculpture, a process that involved the cutting out of forms in steel and welding with an acetylene torch, to the year 1958, an early cut and welded metal piece titled *Ecritures* (1957), created for the exterior of the Collège français in Montreal, proves otherwise. Vaillancourt himself states: "I began making welded metal pieces with cut steel forms as early as 1955 at my Préfontaine-Notre Dame studio in Montreal."³⁸ The smaller scaled *Sculpture No. 1* (ca. 1960-61) in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada has the same sense of lyrical abstraction, a kind of calligraphic signology or abstract writing in metal that is intuitively musical as *Ecritures*.³⁹

³⁷ Michel Martin and Gaston Saint-Pierre, *La Sculpture au Québec 1946-1961: Naissance et Persistance* Québec: Musée du Québec, 1992, 82. (Both of these *Untitled* sculptures are dated 1957 and are in the collections of madame Martine and monsieur Michel Brossard, and madame Mariette and monsieur Claude Vermette respectively.)

³⁸ Armand Vaillancourt, personal interview, 22 June 1997.

³⁹ Vaillancourt was already regularly winning awards for his sculpture. A sculpture exhibited at the Salon de la jeune sculpture won first prize in 1959. He also won 1st prize in sculpture at the Montreal Museum of Arts Spring Exhibition for the years 1961, 1962 and 1963.

Gradually, a transformation occurs, as Vaillancourt places a greater emphasis on structure, geometry and scale in his sculpture monuments. These new works reveal a new interest in the rapport between the language of his sculpture and the surrounding environment. Concerns over positive and negative space, the effects of light on matter, and the ambiguity of abstract form and its relation to natural form continue to persist in his Styrofoam cast bronzes from the early 1960s, but there is an emergent preoccupation with structures, geometry. The forms establish a direct dialogue with the language of architecture but sustain an inherent spontaneity. One sees this emerging in Vaillancourt's unrealized project *Je me souviens* (1967), commissioned for High Park in Toronto. This becomes absolute in *Québec Libre* (1967-71) and is later echoed in *Justice* (1983). The political controversy that surrounded these works was predominantly due to their titling, the media focus and manifestations that occurred around them. The sculptural aesthetic remains pure abstraction. Many of Vaillancourt's small and middle-sized metal cast pieces are simply abstract, and usually untitled. More often than not these are the works that ended up in museum, public galleries, parks and private collections.

In an interview with Denis Boucher in 1969, Vaillancourt asserted the significance of music to his art in saying, "Music is so important to me, that before I see my sculptures in my mind I hear them."⁴⁰ Vaillancourt's cast bronze plaques, exhibited at the Galerie Denyse Delrue in 1957 in a two person show with Jean-Pierre Beaudoin, evidence this.

⁴⁰ Boucher, *Perspectives* 12.

These metal sculptures were hung suspended in the gallery inviting spectators to clash them together to make unusual sounds. They were a kind of musical instrument, albeit abstract. In 1958, 1959 and 1960, Vaillancourt likewise participated in dance spectacles with Suzanne Verdal at the Centre Canadien d'Essai de Montréal.⁴¹ By 1961, for the International Festival of Contemporary Music in Montreal, Vaillancourt was creating what he still refers to as the most daring show of his life, "an orgy with matter".⁴² Vaillancourt recounts:

We gathered one night at an apartment on Sherbrooke St. West with Françoise Riopelle. Jean-Paul Mousseau was there. We were talking about all kinds of things with Pierre Mercure (the organizer of the event). He loved us very much because he was more intellectual than us. In those days there was a big fuss about mixing art together, but they never talked about me as a musician. So Pierre and Mousseau said: 'We're going to put some painting and sculpture at the entrance to the theatre.' I said to Pierre, 'I am doing some music. I don't even have a name for it.' It was concrete music, sound. You know in those days Montreal was my studio. That was why I didn't want to go to Paris when Zadkine invited me to go there in 1957. I felt that no place in the world would give me so much material as Montreal. So we discussed all the night and decided I

⁴¹ Yves Robillard, ed., *Quebec Underground 1962-72*, vol. 1, 35-36.

⁴² Armand Vaillancourt, personal interview, 3 Dec. 1996.

would do a performance. I said, 'Pierre find me \$300. to collect instruments.' So Pierre said 'You're going to do more than exhibit sculpture, you're going to do music.'⁴³

The musical environment Vaillancourt created for the event involved twenty two tons of self-created musical instruments, and included a forest of steel tubes suspended from the ceiling of the hall that numbered in the hundreds and were of varied lengths. Vaillancourt walked and danced between all these elements, what Michelle Tisseyre referred to in *Photo Journal* as his "universe of metal", wearing a British grenadier's hat.⁴⁴ The electro-acoustic sounds that Vaillancourt created using a contact microphone included those of a motorcycle revving its engine through tubes, of a radio whose channels changed at random as it was raised and lowered in a column-like structure, a pneumatic drill that Vaillancourt operated during the performance, a generator, a conveyor belt and a barrel filled with bolts.⁴⁵ These instantaneous sounds were combined with preregistered tape recordings of studio sounds and Pierre Mercure's live musical composition. Yoko Ono recited her neo-dadaist poem *A Grapefruit in the World of Park* in Vaillancourt's environment and John Cage referred to Vaillancourt's sound/sculpture/installation as the work of a genius.⁴⁶ On

⁴³ Armand Vaillancourt, personal interview, 22 June, 1997.

⁴⁴ Michelle Tisseyre, "Ce festival, il est excitant au possible!" *Photo Journal* 12 Aug. 1961, 21.

⁴⁵ Yves Robillard, ed., *Quebec Underground 1962-72*, vol. 1, 36.

⁴⁶ Yves Robillard, 36.

hearing about Vaillancourt's sound/sculpture performance from Pierre Mercure, Edgar Varèse whose *Poème électronique* was presented *in absentia* at the Festival, invited him to perform in Greenwich Village, New York, but Vaillancourt did not accept the offer.⁴⁷

The same year Vaillancourt was included in a group show titled *Contemporary Canadian Painting and Sculpture* at the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery (1963), he was commissioned to create a sculpture for the Ecole Technique in Asbestos. The Asbestos sculpture is an interesting amalgam of Vaillancourt's formal abstract language of sculpture and his overt social commentary. It aroused considerable controversy. Public sentiment about the sculpture in Asbestos hardly showed any reverence for contemporary abstract sculpture. When the piece was installed in 1963 at the Ecole Technique in Asbestos, a city unfamiliar with modern art at the time, some of the citizens demanded it be removed. Weighing 26,000 lbs., the piece, which had been commissioned by the architect Philippe Demers of Sherbrooke, used Vaillancourt's Styrofoam casting technique, but the metal included pieces of bronze within it that created an unusual conglomerate of material within the forms. An anti-modern art group that named themselves MOM (Mouvement pour l'Opposition au Monument) was formed and an ultimatum was presented to the Quebec provincial government. The Director of the Ecole Technique subsequently stated he did not know who had decided to install the piece in front of the school. Mr.

⁴⁷ Francine Couture, ed., *Les Arts Visuels au Québec dans les années soixante: tome II*, (Montreal: vlb, 1997,) 138, note 36.

Osias Poirier, manager of the Asbestos newspaper *Le Citoyen*, stated: "In 20 years it might be beautiful, but not right now."⁴⁸ The excess metal from overflow during casting and cooling was left on the sculpture as the upper part of the piece. Vaillancourt considered the piece a critique of the nuclear threat, something that remained in the public mind due to Cuban exiles unsuccessful attempt to invade the Bay of Pigs on April 17, 1961 and the subsequent nuclear showdown between Fidel Castro and John F. Kennedy. Vaillancourt himself describes the piece as "clouds of death after a nuclear winter. A work that suggests strength, madness and desolation."⁴⁹ The forms that weave their way through and around it look organic while the vertical elements resemble archaic, man-made structures in a state of ruin. One already perceives elements of a myth being constructed around the artist by the media. A black and white film directed by David Millar and produced by the National Film Board of Canada, titled *Vaillancourt Sculpteur* and released in 1964, uses close-ups and action shots in a social realist documentary style that did nothing but add to the myth of Vaillancourt the artist.⁵⁰ Sequences includes Vaillancourt in the process of casting in his atelier with assistants, fire and smoke, the artist pouring oil along one of his bois brûlé, the Asbestos sculpture in transit from Montreal to Asbestos, Vaillancourt riding a motorbike, and the Asbestos piece installed on site.

⁴⁸ Yves Robillard, ed. *Quebec Underground 1962-72*, vol. 1, 40.

⁴⁹ Armand Vaillancourt. personal interview, 31 July, 1997.

⁵⁰ *Vaillancourt Sculpteur*, dir. David Millar, National Film Board of Canada, 1964 (16 mins. 36 secs).

Styrofoam casting was a process of creating shapes in an instant out of Styrofoam whereupon these were cast into metal. Vaillancourt innovated with this process as early as 1954-55 in his Préfontaine-Notre Dame studio in Montreal and claims he was the first in the world to use it.⁵¹ In its final form, it can communicate a sense of a moment frozen in time. Jackson Pollock, whose process parallels Vaillancourt's for its linkage between the immediate physical act of art, the speed of execution and propensity towards abstraction, once wrote:

When I am *in* my painting, I'm not quite aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well. ⁵²

Pollock's sense of being *in the artwork* is similar to Vaillancourt's principle of direct action and use of available materials. Vaillancourt's innovations with Styrofoam forms cast in iron achieved all these aims. It allowed Vaillancourt to create sculpture in any scale he desired, monumental or miniature, in a way that not been attempted anywhere in

⁵¹ Armand Vaillancourt, personal interview, 22 June, 1997.

⁵² Frank O'Hara, *Jackson Pollock*, (New York: George Braziller, 1959) 32.

the world. In a personal note from the 1950s, Vaillancourt writes:

The power of our techniques and the amazing rapidity of our actions gives today, to men, a cosmic dimension. We no longer submit to our destiny; on the contrary, we contribute to construct it (...) At first encounter this new art also known as action seems unlike any others. But it is actually involved with the same matters that art of all ages has dealt with: nature, man and the spirit.⁵³

Spontaneous yet controlled by the artist's motions, Styrofoam cast sculpture had forms that resembled those in nature. They were ambiguous, fluid, allowed a variety of interpretations from different perspectives, and suggested transformation, yet in solid, three-dimensional form and permanent materials. André Jasmin, in an article published in *Vie Etudiante* in May 1961, describes Vaillancourt as a sculptor whose work uses new materials to embody the rhythm of life, who draws on the physical force of nature as his source but whose sculpture likewise embodies "the industrial spirit of our century".⁵⁴ One sees the beginnings of geometric form in Vaillancourt's sculpture *La force* (1964), created for the 1st

⁵³ Armand Vaillancourt, *Personal note*, Vaillancourt studio files, Montreal, ca.1957, np.

⁵⁴ André Jasmin, "Ce sculpteur canadien utilise des matériaux nouveaux et bizarres," *Vie étudiante* 1 May 1961: 11.

International Sculpture Symposium in Montreal."⁵⁵ This sculpture, created on site with an impromptu out-of-doors atelier near Beaver Lake on Mount Royal was so voluminous, comprising 74,000 pounds of cast iron, that it took three days to cool down after the casting was complete. *La force* establishes a rapport between the sculpture not only as object-form but also with the environment. Given the natural setting of the sculpture on Mount Royal park where the sculpture still stands, its ambiguous admixture of abrasive, yet fluid surface textures and the confluence of chunky, cube-like sectional areas plays on and with both organic and man-made structural forms, the piece alludes to the relation between human culture and nature.

The public was witness to a similar live casting "spectacle" in a lot adjacent to Vaillancourt's sculpture foundry on Frontenac St. in the east end of Montreal studio on December 1965 but one that ended unfortunately. The futurist poet Claude Péroquin gave a reading from his latest unbound book of poems titled *Calorifère*, saying "Don't call it a book, it's an object."⁵⁶ Robert Roussil and other members of Montreal's arts community were present. Vaillancourt gave "a flashy display of casting in bronze" but as things were winding down, he approached a barrel with a burning torch. "Blam! A shower of burning metal rose 10, then 50 feet. The last guests to arrive were the crews of three Montreal fire wagons and five

⁵⁵ Yves Robillard, ed. *Quebec Underground 1962-72*, vol. 1: 47.

⁵⁶ Gerald Taaffe, "The Happening that went off with a Bang," *The Canadian* 12 Feb. 1966: 11.

police cars".⁵⁷ Nine people were slightly hurt, four cars and 29 windows of an adjoining plant smashed. The whole "live casting" ended up a disaster. Yet the unfortunate event again fuelled publicity surrounding Vaillancourt, and the myth of the artist was again orchestrated by the media to entertain its readership. One feature in *The Canadian* recounted Vaillancourt's artistic successes and failures and then described the evening's events in a literary, almost fictional way:

When I entered the big shed where Vaillancourt was working, I jumped up on a rusty non-figurative welding to see. With glowing irons Vaillancourt was burning fantastic shapes into plastic moulds. Perspiring workmen were shovelling some dark earth called green sand into the forms on the floor that had already been prepared to receive the molten bronze. Behind them a green-cored flame was hovering over the top of the furnace, like the tongues of fire in the Gospels.⁵⁸

The layers of meaning surrounding Vaillancourt's image were becoming denser, his reputation presented as an inevitable accumulation of extraordinary events, controversies, art works. Media descriptions were becoming almost fictional. Vaillancourt was becoming a media myth.

When Vaillancourt was invited to the International Sculpture

⁵⁷ Taafe, 8.

⁵⁸ Taafe, 16.

Symposium at High Park in Toronto during Canada's Confederation year, he proposed a monumental sculpture for the site. After three months, the 340-ton piece was finally completed in cast iron, whereupon Vaillancourt titled it *Je me souviens*. The controversy his naming of the piece aroused caused the project to be cancelled. Numerous articles appeared in print, and there were television interviews. The issue became distorted by the media, for Vaillancourt's initial grievance was over the lack of sufficient financial support for the project by the City of Toronto and their unwillingness to let Vaillancourt use his own, instead of city workers. Some called Vaillancourt's predominantly abstract forms a "mass of debris".⁵⁹ When asked to comment on the piece, the British sculptor Henry Moore stated: "I have also, like Vaillancourt, had to face up to criticism. But if Vaillancourt is strong, and I believe he is, he will not let himself be affected by the criticism."⁶⁰ Twelve years later, Toronto's mayor David Crombie asked Vaillancourt if he wanted to reclaim the work, whereupon Vaillancourt hired a convoy of eight tractor trailers at a cost of \$12,000 to haul *Je me souviens* back to Quebec. It now sits in pieces in a field near Coteau-du-Lac, close to the location of his former atelier, awaiting a final installation site. Vaillancourt purchased this atelier in 1966 from the Government of Québec and claims that in repossessing it, the Quebec government stole it from him. Vaillancourt's deposit payment for the purchase of the Coteau-du-Lac atelier was blocked and his sculpture foundry, the best equipped in the

⁵⁹ Boucher, 15.

⁶⁰ Boucher, 15.

country at the time, was destroyed. He has never received any compensation.⁶¹

As part of events at Expo '67, the World's Fair held on Ile Ste. Hélène, the Canadian Government and Corporation of Expo '67 commissioned numerous sculptures from a diverse range of sculptors active at the time, including Ted Bieler, Louis Archambault, Hans Schlee, Jordi Bonet, Françoise Sullivan, Robert Murray, Suzanne Guité, Germaine Bergeron, Michael Snow and John Ivor Smith. Vaillancourt created a three-story high concrete mural for the Entrance to the Administrative Building on the Mackay Pier. The dark-light contrast and predominant abstraction of the piece recalls the variant shapes and contours of his bois brûlés sculptures - this time transferred into another medium - concrete. The piece can be considered environmental, in that the scale of the building's interior plays a major role in its conception. A screen of cast steel installed at the entrance to the buffet in the Canadian Pavilion, for its delight in natural abstract forms, ambiguity of shapes, contours, even the positive and negative spatial concerns expressed, establishes a dialogue on the essence of living forms in nature, paralleling the forms in Vaillancourt's sculptures. Like a reflection on our own presence, it carries with it no overt references to the context of contemporary art of the era. The titling of the piece, *Ecran d'acier*, simply references the fact that it is a screen of cast

⁶¹ Armand Vaillancourt, "On ne peut pas éteindre les volcans." (Extract from a speech delivered on the occasion of his Prix Paul-Emile Borduas) *Inter art actuel* 59 (Spring 1994): 16-17.

steel. Yet Toronto-based critic Barry Lord offered a barbed comment on the piece in *artscanada* calling it "another meaningless interruption of what might have been a most dynamic vista". The tone of Lord's article on Canadian sculpture at Expo was generally negative. The show was considered by Lord to be a reflection of the "retarded" state of art in Canada.⁶² More favourable criticism came from William Witthrow, then Director of the Art Gallery of Ontario, who stated that Vaillancourt's concrete wall mural was one of the most successful works of sculpture commissioned at Expo.⁶³

While in Toronto working on *Je me souviens*, Vaillancourt was informed he had won the international competition for a monumental sculpture-fountain to be installed in Embarcadero Plaza, San Francisco. The proposed location of the San Francisco piece, adjacent to an expressway overpass, required a sculptor with a strong sense of scale, and this was something Vaillancourt could provide. He visited San Francisco during the height of the High Park, Toronto controversy and returned later to rent a large atelier at 757 Folsom St. The project took four years to complete. A massive construction of rectangular concrete forms that rise dramatically out of the water, it measures 140 by 200 ft., stands 36 feet high, 15 of these below grade. The fountain circulated 30,000 gallons of water a minute, which it poured out through various spouts as well as a cascade prior to

⁶² Barry Lord, "Canadian sculptors at Expo," *artscanada* 108 (May 1967) :13.

⁶³ William Witthrow, *Canadian Sculpture Expo '67* (Montreal: Graph, 1967) : np.

restrictions on the use of water due to drought.⁶⁴ The Canadian art historian David Burnett, writing in *Contemporary Canadian Art*, commented that Vaillancourt's Embarcadero Plaza sculpture fountain "looks like the result of some massive disaster or a warning of physical and cultural upheaval."⁶⁵ Titled *Québec Libre*, the piece is better known in the United States than it is in Canada. Like the concrete wall mural conceived for Expo '67, the San Francisco sculpture fountain establishes a rapport with the immediate built environment of the surrounds. The language is architectural in that it uses structures in a sculptural way.

The sculpture fountain's elongated cube-like forms are like the tentacles of some immense geometrical octopus and the architectural references look like they are breaking open. Vaillancourt's Embarcadero sculpture-fountain is undoubtedly the most ambitious monumental project undertaken by a Quebec sculptor of his generation, for the vastness of its scale. The San Francisco commission maintains a gestural, musical sense, even despite the immensity of its scale. One feels something of the spontaneous abstraction of action painting in this piece, but here the active gesture is transposed into three-dimensional concrete. The work would later be echoed, using the same principal forms but admittedly on a more modest scale, in another sculpture-fountain project titled *Justice* realized for the Palais de Justice de Quebec City in 1983.

⁶⁴ Gerald D. Adams, "Vaillancourt Fountain's fate hangs on waterfront plan," *San Francisco Examiner* 18 Oct. 1992: B-3.

⁶⁵ David Burnett and Marilyn Schiff, *Contemporary Canadian Art* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1983): 232-233.

Merging social activism with his concrete commission, Vaillancourt stencilled the words Québec Libre in red acrylic paint on the fountain the night before its unveiling in 1971. During the inauguration the next day, when he saw civic employees had whited it out, Vaillancourt jumped in the fountain and painted Québec Libre on again numerous times. With Thomas Hoving, then Director of the Manhattan Metropolitan Museum of Art and numerous dignitaries looking on, Vaillancourt advanced and retreated from the microphones installed near the pool's edge, expressing his rage at the compromises he claimed Halprin and the Redevelopment Agency had pressed on him. When questioned about his actions, Vaillancourt said he was not defacing his sculpture stating: "No, no. It's a joy to make a free statement. This fountain is dedicated to all freedom. Free Quebec! Free East Pakistan! Free Viet Nam! Free the whole world!"⁶⁶ The San Francisco Redevelopment Agency's Executive Director, Justin Herman, unaware of what was transpiring, asked from the podium, "If our artist is in the audience, will he please raise his hand so we may applaud him?". Seated beside his sculpture, his feet dangling in the water of the fountain, Vaillancourt responded by letting out a piercing war whoop for freedom and was instantly surrounded by a crowd of cameramen and reporters. When asked to comment on the piece, Thomas Hoving stated he believed that "a work must be born in controversy" and added that he liked the fountain for "its strength - it has a baroque daring".⁶⁷ At the

⁶⁶ Robert Hughes, "War Whoop for Freedom, " *Time* 3 May 1971: 64.

⁶⁷ Donald Conter, "Sculptor Disrupts Dedication Rites," *Quebec Underground 1962-72*, vol. 1, ed. Yves Robillard, 45. (reprint from the *San Francisco Examiner*, 22 April 1971)

inauguration bash that followed, Lawrence Ferlinghetti read some of his poems and the rock group Jefferson Airplane played for the audience. In an era of peace and love, of Haight-Ashbury and hippies, living in San Francisco, art was, for Armand Vaillancourt, "the vitamin of love".⁶⁸ His involvement with Black activists during the creation of the Embarcadero Sculpture fountain in San Francisco in the 1960s is but a reflection of his broader social concerns.

Aside from the controversy, media and art criticism of the sculpture varied greatly. *Time Magazine's* art critic Robert Hughes described the piece in glowing terms, stating; "Politics aside, his (Vaillancourt's) San Francisco fountain is a most impressive piece of urban statuary, giving a much needed accent to the wide expanse of Embarcadero Plaza. But the furious Vaillancourt refuses to admit there can be any separation of art from politics."⁶⁹ Several years an article in *Time* magazine by A.T. Baker described the San Francisco fountain's writhing contours as "Stonehenge unhinged with plumbing troubles", but acceded to the fact it splashes no passers-by. "It is, however, laced with 'lily pad' walks that offer a spray-drenched way, daring visitors to walk beneath its eccentric geometry."⁷⁰ The press in Quebec treated Vaillancourt's exploits in San Francisco with an admixture of astonishment and revelation. The

⁶⁸ Yves Robillard, ed., *Quebec Underground 1962-72*, vol. 1: 45.

⁶⁹ Hughes 64.

⁷⁰ A.T. Baker, "Shaping Water into Art," *Time* 12 Sept. 1977: 28-29.

aesthetic of his art is seldom discussed. A feature article that appeared in *Perspectives* titled *Pour Armand Vaillancourt, la sculpture est un combat à finir contre la matière* states:

This man, now 30 years old, is not like anybody else. He is a unique phenomena as Hemingway was, a hurricane nothing can stop, a fire that cannot be extinguished (...) If nothing can stop him, he will live 100 years and his sculpture will cover the world.⁷¹

Controversy has continued to surround *Québec Libre*. In 1987, when Bono from the rock group U2 called Vaillancourt up to tell him he had painted the words "Stop the traffic, Rock and Roll" on the sculpture, and asked Vaillancourt to support his action, Vaillancourt immediately came forth. The next day he was in San Francisco painting "Stop the Madness" live on stage at the Oakland Colosseum before a crowd of 70,000 spectators while U2 performed their popular Joshua Tree show. As he had done during the inauguration of the fountain-sculpture in Embarcadero Plaza, Vaillancourt made pronouncements about justice for American blacks, the Amerindians and the peoples of the world. In defense of Bono's actions, Vaillancourt stated "Graffiti is a very necessary disease. Young

⁷¹ Guy Fournier, "Pour Armand Vaillancourt, la sculpture est un combat à finir contre la matière," *Perspectives* 1 June 1963: 24.

people don't have the access to front pages that politicians do."⁷²

The San Francisco earthquake in 1992 caused the expressway next to Embarcadero Plaza to collapse. The plaza was damaged and the whole area is now undergoing reconstruction. The City of San Francisco's chief urban design consultant has recommended that Vaillancourt's sculpture, which was not damaged, either be demolished or moved in order to make way for "a better people gathering place".⁷³ Once again the Vaillancourt Fountain found itself front and centre in the public eye, this time because of an act of God. New state and federal laws enacted prior to the catastrophe that prohibit altering public art without the artist's permission are playing a role in the controversy. Vaillancourt strongly contested the proposed removal the sculpture and the City of San Francisco, which originally paid him \$18,000 to build it, remains undecided. Arts Commission President Debra Lehane, manager of the City of San Francisco's art collection, who researched the question of altering or removing art works, stated in 1992 that the fountain is "part of San Francisco's history, selected through competition. If we throw it out, artists creating public art today may feel there'll be no respect for their work."⁷⁴ The dilemma over artist's rights surrounding *Québec Libre's* aesthetic, historic and civic importance remains unresolved. A committee is currently

⁷² U2, press statement, San Francisco, 14 Nov. 1987 (Vaillancourt studio files, Montreal): np.

⁷³ Adams B-1.

⁷⁴ Adams B-3.

in the process of defending Vaillancourt's sculpture and the legal ramifications promise to be as fascinating as the controversy surrounding the dismantling of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981) in Manhattan's Federal Plaza.

When yet another controversy arose, this time surrounding the work of the artist Jordi Bonet's commissioned 12,000 square foot triptych mural for the Grand Théâtre in Quebec City in March 1971, Vaillancourt again rose to the occasion. The events of the October Crisis had just recently passed, and soldiers were still on the streets of Quebec. There was a general feeling of social tension in the air. The writer Roger Lemelin had instigated a movement to have Bonet's mural removed from the Grand Théâtre principally because the ceramic wall mural (which dealt with themes of death, life and liberty) included the phrase from the poet Claude Péroquin: "Vous êtes pas écoeurés de mourir, bande de caves, c'est assez!"

Lemelin objected to the fact that Montreal artists were leaving their spittle in his city. A petition signed by 9,000 supporting the mural was presented to counter Lemelin's petition signed by 6,000. The debate over freedom of expression and the use of proper French ensued and it was hotly debated in Quebec parliament in the General Assembly. On March 8th 1971, 1600 people participated in a protest at the Grand Théâtre, organized by the Committee for the Defense of the mural. The issues raised by the petition of support were that the respect of a work of art is fundamental to any civilized society and that a climate of free expression is necessary for artistic creation. Wearing 15th century medieval armature

he had rented in Montreal, Vaillancourt rode into the protest on horseback like a medieval chevalier or modern-day Don Quixote. The event further enhanced Vaillancourt's media image, already somewhat romanticized, of the artist with his long hair and beard protesting social and artistic causes. The event was widely covered in the press, just as Vaillancourt's *Asbestos*, *Je me souviens* and *Québec Libre* controversies had been. The artist cultivated this image of "what the artist should be", feeding the press with an image for public consumption.⁷⁵ In her master's thesis presented to the Université de Montréal in 1971, *Armand Vaillancourt et la Presse Ecrite*, Lise Lamarche provides insightful comments on the media's addiction to controversy, and Vaillancourt's corresponding need for the media:

This filtering of events is furthered by the reader's level of involvement, according to which the latter feels more or less concerned about this or that event. (...) One of the main propellers for this implication is the degree of conflict that a situation might provoke. We have seen that Vaillancourt's reputation and that of his sculptures are, to a large part, based on the fact that they are controversial, that one talks about them.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ "Inter art actual," 59 (1994): 3.

⁷⁶ Lise Lamarche, "Armand Vaillancourt et la Presse Ecrite," (unpublished M.A. thesis, Montreal: Université de Montreal, 1971) 103.

The symposium of environmental sculpture held in Chicoutimi in 1980 provided an occasion for Vaillancourt to work on a grand scale without the pressures of commissioned work. Using the white rocks common to the region, he created a base, or field, and then went on to assemble rocks into cage-like structures. The process involved collecting the rocks and their subsequent "containment" in the cages. The cages were themselves assembled into consecutive rows on the bed of stones he had laid out underneath. The piece referenced nature using just one element, the rocks, and it referenced man-made structures by using one element, the cages. The piece suggested containment, rationalization, but in a passive sense.

Vaillancourt's untitled sculptures from the late 1950s and early 1960s will often combine welded metal sections in spontaneous assemblage with sections of tree branches. In these earlier pieces nature is enclosed, but not passively. The assemblage of metal elements that effectively contain the tree branches in these pieces, unlike *Intemporel*, follow the overall shapes within. These early works evoke the sense of an ongoing struggle, even of violence, that there is a conflict between these two elements. The actual site for *Intemporel*, overlooking an old pulp mill known as La Vieille Pulperie in Chicoutimi, provided a historical context for the piece. Yet with *Intemporel*, as in many of Vaillancourt's projects, the notions of recuperation and labour remain essential to the work as process. The gathering of stones became a spiritual act, a gathering of strength.

The simple presence of this piece was unusual and unexplained.⁷⁷

Concrete poetry likewise finds its parallels in Vaillancourt's sculpture. Vaclav Havel, Dieter Rot, Daniel Spoerri, Brion Gyson, Ian Hamilton Finlay and Canada's bpNicol were among its earliest proponents in the 1960s. Built out of a language where the arrangement of the word, the letter and the line as object was deemed to be as significant as their inherent meaning, concrete poetry finds its precedents in Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* (1918). Adapted to sculpture, concrete poetry becomes, for example, *el eco del oro* (1961), the German (Mexico City based) artist Mathias Goeritz' concrete poem/sculpture of iron circles welded together as lines of varying dimensions that effectively form a wall of letters. Vaillancourt's *Manhole Series* (1984) are essentially a kind of concrete poetry sculpture where the sculpture object fulfills the same role as the poem object. Imprinted onto paper pulp, these forms taken from Montreal street sewer manholes were appropriated from real life and in a scale of life. The process in the *Manhole Series* is similar to that of Australian artist Nikolaus Lang's bleached white pulp forms and tree bark prints. Lang likewise creates his images in real life scale from nature while also alluding to traditional Tasmanian and southern Australian aboriginal bark paintings. The *Manhole series* are also imprints from real life, but in this case they reference human social and urban realities, concerns Vaillancourt likewise voices in the performances, sporadic painting and sculpture happenings he undertakes in a variety of ever changing venues.

⁷⁷ "Armand Vaillancourt," *Intervention* 9, Autumn 1980: 16-18.

Raising the capital to attend a sculpture symposium marking the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in the Dominican Republic in 1985, Vaillancourt used the event to manifest his social concern not only for the extinct Taino tribe of the region, but also for the oppressed peoples of this region who live in *barrios*. Comprising a massive central block of composite sculpted stones measuring 7,32 metres in length, 3.26 metres in height and 1,83 metres in width, *El Clamor* had ninety-two hands in cut steel inserted along its top. A five foot long dove was installed twelve feet above. A fountain trench designed to carry water was dug around the piece, and pipes and hydraulic pumps were installed. Barbed wire strung out around the bottom suggested containment, while the hands emerging on top a struggle upwards, "towards freedom". Vaillancourt referred to this piece later as: "A symbol of the vital energy of all these oppressed people (...) real freedom, that which is inside, that which can not be contained!" The participation of local workers, and the physical labour *El Clamor* involved for the artist, brought back memories of the hard work he had undertaken as a youth on the family farm.⁷⁸ The fountain section of the piece still remains incomplete due to a lack of further funding.

In terms of the process that brought about its realization, *Drapeau blanc!* (1987) involved the collecting of materials in out-of-door settings. The transportation, relocation and eventual transformation of natural materials into artworks through surface treatment and arrangement into sculptural environments is intensely physical. Again, this

⁷⁸ Alain Gignac, "Armand Vaillancourt Libertador," *Espace Sculpture* 5- 2 (Winter 1989): 23.

piece demands a kind of labour more readily associated with labour in primary resource industries such as farm or forest work. Vaillancourt perceives trees as an integral presence (and not as a product resource). As art critic Guy Viau once commented: "Vaillancourt respects primary materials. He seeks to rediscover an elementary sense of things (...) He has the reactions, carries himself like a primitive."⁷⁹ For Vaillancourt natural materials are something the artist must add to or work through. They have a spiritual dimension, an interiority. For *Drapeau blanc!*, Vaillancourt literally transported 92 tons of calcite from the Saguenay-Lac St. Jean region to Laval University in Ste. Foy, Quebec. The rocks were then painted white and citations from such renowned Quebecers as poet Gaston Miron, songwriters Gilles Vigneault and Felix Leclerc were sand blasted in relief on the rocks. Other citations included the writings of an anonymous Hindu poet and the following quote from Martin Luther King: "We have to learn to live together like brothers, otherwise we'll die together like idiots." Another from the Quebec writer Simonne Monet-Chartrand reads: "I do not want the snow, the years and the cold to freeze my memory."

Invited to New York City in 1988 to contribute a portrait to a vast social realist mural 70 feet high and 85 feet long on the Pathfinder Building in Greenwich Village not far from the Hudson River, Vaillancourt chose to represent Louis Riel, the Manitoba Métis leader on this collective homage to civil rights leaders and freedom fighters from throughout the world. Among the other portraits contributed by artists from South Africa,

⁷⁹ Guy Viau, "Vaillancourt," *Vie des arts* 35 (1964): 28.

Ireland, Argentina, Columbia,, Mexico and the United States were Thomas Sankara, Mother Jones, Emiliano Zapata, Carlos Fonseca and Malcolm X. When asked why he had decided to contribute to the mural he stated: "Louis Riel like Norman Bethune, defended the oppressed, the exploited and, above all, he did not let anyone walk over him."⁸⁰

During an outdoor sculpture atelier held on Crescent St. in downtown Montreal in June of 1989 that included Ivanhoe Fortier, Don Darby and Serge Beaumont as participants, Vaillancourt created *Paix, Justice et Liberté*. Inscribed on one of the elements, the exterior section of an industrial-scale recuperated cistern, were the names of thirty-two leading Quebec corporations involved, directly or indirectly, in the arms trade along with their annual profit figures. The work also included the words "Two days of military expenditures worldwide, around four billion, eight hundred thousand dollars, would allow the United Nations to stop the desertification of the world within twenty years."⁸¹ A critic commenting on the piece called it "a work charged with social and political significance that clearly demonstrates that a work of art can have an objective function."⁸² Seen in this busy downtown shopping area of Montreal, *Paix, Justice et Liberté* included among its other elements a structure with two

⁸⁰ "Armand Vaillancourt à New York," *Le Soleil* 17 Nov. 1988: C-1.

⁸¹ Claude Paul Gauthier, "Matière à Musée," *Espace Sculpture* 6-1 (Autumn 1989): 13.

⁸² Gauthier 13.

seats set on top and wings projecting from its sides. A series of circular disks of cut steel formed a sort of daisy chain that descended from the sculpture's base and traversed part of the street. As people drove by, they effectively touched the sculpture with the tires of their car.

With *Hommage aux Amérindiens* (1991- 92), an assemblage of thirteen tepee-like structures varying from twelve to eighteen feet in height and made out of recycled and painted wood, we yet again see this concern for human rights, and in this case, those of minorities so often present in Vaillancourt's social sculpture. Vaillancourt dealt with the theme of Amerindian rights with a totemic wood sculpture titled *Justice aux Indiens d'Amérique* created in 1957. His belief that art should be a catalyst for social change and that all peoples deserve cultural recognition are reflected in this simply conceived piece which addressed the rights of the Amerindian and Innu tribes in North America. *Hommage aux Amérindiens* stood in front of the Standard Life Building on Sherbrooke St. in Montreal just as it had in the Jardin Saint-Sauveur when Vaillancourt was building the piece. The standard "found" cut wood sections in various sizes, leftovers acquired from a mill in the north, appropriated and recycled selected material were the main material used for the piece. Their standardized look is the antithesis of Vaillancourt's bois brûlé sculptures, whose forms were recuperated from nature in their natural state to then be worked on. *Hommage aux Amérindiens* assembles *pro forma* wood, itself already structural, and again its message is political. In their final state, these assemblages look like tepees, structures built out of natural materials by traditional native peoples whose own cultures were integrated into the culture of nature. The whole piece was bolted together like a makeshift

IKEA structure and painted over in simple, bright colours. The surface areas of Vaillancourt's piece had traditional native symbols derived from a variety of North American native tribes ornamenting their surfaces. The resulting construction had little suggestion of the myths and superstitions about Native culture colonial Canadian and Quebec societies have espoused in the past. Spiritual concerns were expressed through a modular grace, with a practical simplicity and with a positive formal elegance.

Later on exhibited at other sites in Quebec, *Hommage aux Amerindiens* eventually went into storage in the east end of Montreal. Not long after the avant-gardist theatre group Carbon 14 bought the building where the piece was housed, it was cut into sections with a jigsaw and effectively destroyed without the artist being notified in advance. As a phenomenon, the destruction of *Hommage aux Amérindiens* raised questions about how avant-gardists perceive each other, particularly from different milieus, in this case theatre and sculpture.

Two years later, in 1994, Vaillancourt used computer animated technology to create designs for a 100 metre tall *Ecological Tower*, to have been built out of steel. Dedicated to planetary conscience, the piece was proposed for construction on the banks of the Eastman River, a river system that has dried up due to the James Bay hydroelectric project. Illuminated throughout by a system of lights, and with an ascending spiral ladder in its centre, the piece was to have had hundreds of bells suspended along its structural exterior and an observatory with satellite communications equipment on top. Vaillancourt's *Ecological Tower* remains simply a maquette and has not been built due to a lack of funding.

The progression in Vaillancourt's career is from free public sculpture (*The Tree of Durocher St.*), to public commissioned monuments (*Monument aux Morts, Québec Libre, Je me souviens*), to non-funded political monuments such as *El Clamor, Drapeau blanc!*, *Paix, Justice et Liberté* and *Hommage aux Amérindiens*. *Song of the Nations*, commissioned by the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown in 1996, finds him returning to public commissioned sculpture. *Song of the Nations* is a reflective piece that involves a similar search for interiority or *what is within* the material, as *The Tree of Durocher St.* The tree form is conceived of less as a container than as a continuum, something with numerous layers, harder and softer areas, some visible and others imperceptible. The diversity of tree forms, each singularly unique yet basically similar in their growth structure, paraphrases the many layers of life: physical and material, but equally spiritual. Vaillancourt's piece recognizes the resource value of these trees, but goes on to transform, to peel away the bark layers. This search for interiority creates a cultural value out of materials whose value is conventionally perceived to be economic. According to one's interpretation, these leftovers from a clear-cut that hang like corpses could be a *Massacre of the Innocents* or a joyous elegy to the many diverse nations of the earth, with Quebec in the centre, the only identifiable nation. Vaillancourt's comment on this creation reads as follows:

Quebec is just one small part of my social preoccupations. It is a piece of the cosmos. And in this cosmos, there is a small planet, the earth, which is in grave danger. Human folly is so great that we have arrived at a cross-road. Maybe we have

passed it. We pollute all our rivers, our lakes, our oceans. We are in the process of destroying our animals and the forests.(...) We should have our eyes wide open, arm ourselves with courage and fight vigorously if we want to enact profound changes.⁸³

Martin Lerner, reviewing *Song of the Nations* in *Arts Atlantic* describes the absurdity of Vaillancourt's position as a socially engaged artist:

Vaillancourt flaunts his exclusion from certain official art circles, but he is a besieger as well as besieged; and while he touts for an independent Quebec, one can't imagine him being content with the resulting government.⁸⁴

Song of the Nations is likewise an act of "refuse" recuperation. *Arte Povera*, the avant-garde European movement that originated in Italy, used available product refuse and natural materials such as glass, kettles, discarded clothes, sand, plexiglass to critique contemporary values of overconsumption and production. Though Vaillancourt's approach to available materials is avant-gardist and shares something in common with the *Arte Povera* group from Europe, his vision of *what these material*

⁸³ Emmanuèle Garnier, "Coup de coeur: Vaillancourt," *Topo Magazine* 42, Feb. 1997: 9.

⁸⁴ Martin Lerner, "Visions from Quebec/ A Response from Visual Artists & Poets to the Quebec Question," *Arts Atlantic* 15-1 (1997) : 23.

resources are and *what they should express* is altogether different. Rather than merely reassembling, collaging products, objects and materials out of context, Vaillancourt will usually collect them in a context of nature that he considers to be its original state of being. He then reconfigures them in a manner that links him to the Automatist tradition. Materials are conceived of as abstract, an eternal presence, rather than to reflect the malaise of overconsumption and production of post-industrial society. Materials are what they are and he is largely uncritical of them, whether lumber, a tree branch, concrete or steel. In this sense, his works thus become linked to a collective, populist vision of society that depends on the culture of nature, and this is part of the colonial tradition of a country that historically has been engaged in resource gathering rather than manufacture. Vaillancourt's act of recuperation is perceived as resource, rather than refuse, recuperation.

The orchestration of *Song of the Nations* could also represent an intense vein structure of an immense body - the earth. The applied colours, the schema, the many sizes and shapes of tree trunks and limbs, each inverted and suspended in mid-air, are like a cacophony, a riot of sound, the most abstract. *A Song of the Nations* is in the same lineage as his sculpture/performances but in this case is a response to an rural island environment. There is no sound. The forest of colour that orchestrates the piece is offset by some unpainted and one burnt tree limb. The unpainted tree limbs become keys or reference points to nature in its original state amid the riot of colour that surrounds them. (Vaillancourt himself refers to forest trees as a kind of life drawing as opposed to *nature morte*.) The black painted trees in the piece likewise allude to his impressions of the

burnt charcoal forest he witnessed near Montague, Prince Edward Island. The peeling away the bark and painting that took place within the gallery space gradually arrived at a final product instinctively and largely without any prior planning or reflection. One of the few trees Vaillancourt kept in its natural state in *Song of the Nations* has insect trails, pockets and holes in the wood. This wood surface transformed unconsciously by insects and effected *in nature by nature* references other life forms - life itself - the source from which Vaillancourt enacts further transformations to create art. (He has also spoken of building wood structures out of abandoned beaver hut wood - structures created and built by animals.) If there is an element of chance in Vaillancourt's work, it is always envisioned in relation to the endless variety and nature of materials.

As Vaillancourt's installation at the Confederation Centre has been effectively encoded by the architecture, placed in a niche, it occupies that same non-space of part-sculptural/part painterly subjectivity that Blinky Palermo's (a student of Joseph Beuys) abstract paintings do. Palermo's pieces startle and shock with the power of form and seek to revive a spiritual potential lost in the purely formalist, dead lineage of abstract colour field painting, or Donald Judd's aseptic, museologically-correct sculptural pieces. Just as Palermo integrated actual objects and materials directly onto museum walls so they effectively became the canvas, to challenge the notion of so-called "pictorial space", Vaillancourt's sculptural work extends the abstraction by using the niche-like area of the museum as a subject frame to confront the problem of the sculptural installation as pure phenomenology. This environmental sculpture creates continuities between the architecture and *that which is contained within*.

As such, it becomes real virtuality as opposed to virtual reality, an assault on the hermetic, binary logic of the computer age. Trees are themselves a presence, in a natural or urban setting, effectively drawing done by nature in a continuum. By adding synthetic colour to these works, Vaillancourt references the human or social aspect of life. The niche becomes a kind of open frame that Vaillancourt plays on, by extending the placement of these inverted trees beyond and out of sight into the ceiling, presenting them as a collectivity of individual elements. As process or realization, these works are not descriptive, but instead manifestations of a state of being, enhanced by a hypertrophic variety of applied colours and natural form. *Song of the Nations* is as much an act of remembrance, not only of Vaillancourt's experience of the site where the wood was found, but also of his rural origins and of nature in its purist state. The endlessly changing forest environment has been transformed into a canvas, an entirely architectural canvas.

Vaillancourt communicates the cultural value of a potential resource - trees, forests - to suggest both cultural and economic self-sufficiency, a cultural vision rooted in a "small is beautiful" approach to regional economy. The application of colour onto the wood after removal of the bark "skins" of the trees is an act of re-identifying what lies beneath the surface, the the forms within, which then become surface forms themselves. In their final state on exhibition, they become a collectivity of forms with positive and negative spatial values. The piece also becomes a kind of autobiographical reflection on the artist's own history of working with wood, as evidenced by his the bois brûlé sculptures from the 1950s, as well as the minimalist simple wood forms and mixed media wood and metal

structures from the pre-1967 period, even Vaillancourt's more structural *Hommage aux Amérindiens*. The process is more passive here, in that it implies an acceptance of the tree forms as they are, and is less of a search for interiority.

The only symbol or sign on the work is a patterning of fleur-de-lys in the central tree trunk effectively "embraced" by a huge mauve trunk. The act of placing a series of fleur-de-lys on the royal blue painted central tree trunk in *Song of the Nations*, cradled as it is by a larger one, in Charlottetown, the birthplace of Canadian Confederation some 130 years later, is an act of imagination, of projection, something so sublimely ridiculous it causes one to question both the artist's and the Confederation Centre's purpose in sponsoring the project. Yet given the venue, Vaillancourt's gesture was not designed for a Quebec audience but to challenge Canadian social and cultural stereotypes. Without the fleur-de-lys, would the sculpture, whose conception is ultimately lyrical, joyous, theatrical and even musical in its orchestration, be judged as a threat? Certainly not. The viewer's own cultural coding is what establishes and designates the aesthetic value of the work. Adopted as a nationalist symbol of Quebec, the fleur-de-lys is considered colonial by some for its French rather than Québécois origins. (Quebec within Canada is like a Russian doll, each nationalist definition opening up to reveal another one within.) Vaillancourt's vision perceives nationhood to be a positive embodiment of a collective and public cultural identity and markedly contrasts a postmodernist or relativist view of nationalism. One's perception of this river of trees that descend from the ceiling of the

Confederation Centre Art Gallery would be altogether different if it had no symbols. By including the symbols, Vaillancourt has provided a comment not only on his own values but on the perception people bring to the work of art.

The problem of Canadian nationalism versus Quebec nationalism is not unique. Indeed by comparing two English Canadian artists, Greg Curnoe and John Boyle's viewpoints on English Canadian nationalism, their espousal of regional culture with Vaillancourt's, one arrives at some astonishing similar points of view on consumer capitalism. Commenting on American imperialism in San Francisco in 1971, Vaillancourt stated:

We engage in area of revolution, you know. And the revolution in Quebec is the revolution that's happening all over the world. The colonialists are trying to kick out the oppression of the imperialist system. It goes farther than the Quebec situation.⁸⁵

Canadian artist Greg Curnoe's artworks such as *True North Strong and Free* (1968) which included the words "Close the 49th Parallel" , his maps of North America with Mexico and Canada sharing a common border, America having been left out, attacked the presence of what leftists of the era called American imperial culture in Canada just as

⁸⁵ Yves Robillard, ed., *Quebec Underground 1962-72*, vol. 1: 47.

Vaillancourt's pronouncements did. Curnoe's view of nationalism defined "being Canadian" in a negative sense, as in opposition to something else, in this case American culture. John Boyle's more fervent anti-imperialism, by way of contrast with Armand Vaillancourt's, resulted in largely emotional and patriotic polemic and anti-American sloganeering. Pierre Théberge provides some lucid insights in Boyle's cultural nationalism when he states:

Boyle expounds the traditional and narrow English-Canadian cultural ideology: that culture and the arts are a factor of unification, of unity, and that there can be one Canadian culture. Cultural pluralism is ignored.⁸⁶

John Boyle's *Continental Refusal/ Refus Continental*, originally written for a public reading, provides an even more ironic comparison. The titling of Boyle's manifesto mimicked Paul-Emile Borduas' *Refus Global* and expressed concerns over Canada's becoming a satellite of American culture in economic, social and political terms. Boyle suggested a scenario quite similar to that many Quebec separatists have espoused in the past, namely that economic separation and a corresponding twenty to forty per cent drop in the standard of living are the only way of preserving cultural integrity.⁸⁷ Boyle's incapacity to recognize the pluralistic nature of Canadian society and culture were a distinct blind spot in his proclamation.

⁸⁶ Pierre Théberge, *Greg Curnoe: Retrospective* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1982) 20.

⁸⁷ Théberge, 20.

With the benefit of hindsight we can see that while English-Canadian nationalists of this era viewed America as the enemy, Québécois often defined Canada as the protagonist. Yet Vaillancourt's declarations of freedom and human rights, continually evident throughout his career of social sculpture and manifestation, seems closer to the American model, even when critiquing it. In an essay titled *Canada as Counter-Environment*, Marshall McLuhan states:

The *Fall of Quebec* (1759) and the *Peace of Paris* (1763) created the same psychic border for French Canada as the Civil War defeat did in the mind of the American South. The defeat stimulated the feeling of an historical present that was absent in the victors.⁸⁸

This feeling for an historical present, in the case of Vaillancourt, creates a sort of cognitive dissonance, where history is perceived as a living active element in contemporary life, a battle to be fought in the arena of art, hence the social activism and political persuasion in his sculpture. As Vaillancourt stated in 1963, "I see life as if through a large window and I will cease to work when society nourishes itself from art."⁸⁹ In a brief essay titled *Art As Anti-Environment*, McLuhan addresses the issue of the image of the artist in a world of changing technologies: "... it seems

⁸⁸ Marshall, McLuhan and Bruce Roberts, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1989) 160.

⁸⁹ Guy Fournier, 27.

plausible to view the artistic image as a control situation for the corporate anaesthesia engendered by new technology."⁹⁰

The dilemmas inherent to Vaillancourt's *Song of the Nations* are not so much of his own making as a symptom of Canada's own problem of a nation (Quebec) within a nation. The applied symbols are merely a signifier that provokes a variety of codified responses from viewers according to their own particular cultural viewpoint. While a foreigner might find it intriguing, English Canadians would be possibly upset, and French Canadians would merely perceive them as an ongoing symbol of cultural identity. Like the fleur-de-lys, the beaver and the maple leaf are in fact French Canadian symbols, later appropriated by English Canada and now perceived as intrinsically Canadian emblems. In an era of political correctness when experimentation is at a premium and less recognized than in the 1960s, Armand Vaillancourt stands the test of time, and continues to pursue his own brand of social sculpture. As New York-based artist Stephen Lack, who began his artistic career in Montreal in the 1960s and 1970s, comments:

Armand Vaillancourt embodies the spirit of Quebec. He and his work are inseparable. Bold, iconoclastic, macho, romantic, rough, beautiful, full of bravado, rhythm, sensuality and humour, Vaillancourt represents something that has all but

⁹⁰ Marshall McLuhan, "Art as Anti-Environment," *Essays of our Time*, ed. Bernard Webber, 2nd Ed. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1967) 163.

disappeared in the now domesticated art world of politically correct and bureaucratically approved (...) He is willing to take a chance and translate the passions of his heart into the unyielding materials of stone and iron.⁹¹

In *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* Lucy Lippard describes the point of view socially committed artists such as Armand Vaillancourt tend to share in common, and the manner in which they perceive their art to be a reflection of democratic principles:

Cultural democracy is a right to make and to be exposed to the greatest diversity of expression. It is based on a view of the arts as communicative exchange. A true cultural democracy would encourage artists to speak for themselves and for their communities, and it would give all of us access to audiences both like and unlike ourselves (...) Most activist artists are trying to be synthesizers as well as catalysts; trying to combine social action, social theory, and the fine arts tradition, in a spirit of multiplicity and integration, rather than one of narrowing choices.⁹²

This attitude not only embodies principles of democracy, but

⁹¹ Stephen Lack, letter to the author, 5 June 1997.

⁹² Lucy Lippard, *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art/Godine, 1984) 342.

also idealizes the nature of creative work, perceives it to be part of a more general state of culture. These beliefs have as much to do with the nature of the artistic process as with a sense of community, state or nationhood. Aesthetics can be multi-dimensional, involve a variety of activities, and may even extend into the realm of education. In this way the artist can move between generations, ethnic groups and the sexes to establish a broader social matrix. Vaillancourt's recent activities have involved working with school children on a variety of artistic projects, some short term and others long term.

Within the current context of artmaking, Vaillancourt's commissioned and independent sculptural projects affirm a positivist view of history. Despite his professed anti-war and humanistic sentiments, he seldom questions the credibility of the monument or its role as a public icon. Permanence in sculpture is seen as a kind of presence or evidence of historic and collective will. The sculpture is viewed in a classic sense, as an artistic statement that has permanence. Nihilism is seen as the negation of social progress. Society is conceived as an organic whole, even if it has many social injustices. While he works with ephemeral materials in private, creates temporary installations in Montreal for such venues as the *Inspecteur Epingle* and *Foufounes Electriques*, when it comes to public monuments, his view of their role and function is largely uncritical. For such works his vision remains a romantic one. In his manifestations and dealings with the press that Vaillancourt questions the historical process and describes society and the process of culture in dialectic terms. The creation of monuments may be critically inspired, but the monuments themselves reinforce a different kind of social order. The role and function

of public sculpture in city or park sites is largely "official", or even for symposia, is somewhat unnatural. The sculpture's purpose, in these terms, is largely functional, formal and has a concise perception of what history is. His working method becomes creative precisely because a given venue, situation or commission is merely a springboard to media attention, or alternatively a vehicle to engage in public protest and social action.

Toronto-based Canadian sculptor Mark Lewis' mock monuments, modelled after Leninist monuments in Russia and erected after the fall of communism in Europe at various sites including Parc Lafontaine in Montreal (1990), are a good example of the artist's questioning of the role of the monument in "public parks" and officially designated sites. These "non-spaces" are seen as official, and as such, public perception of their function and use is modulated, controlled. In Europe, Joachim Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz construct "official" monuments but do so with a sophisticated sense of how ambiguous a society's interpretation of history can be. In Harburg, Germany, they constructed a twelve-metre high, one metre square pill made of hollow aluminum. At its unveiling in 1986, a temporary inscription at its base could be read in many languages - German, French, English, Russian, Hebrew, Arabic and Turkish:

We invite the citizens of Harburg and visitors to the tower, to add their names here to ours. In doing so, we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12 metre tall lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day, it will have disappeared completely and

the site of the Harburg monument against Fascism will be empty. In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against fascism.⁹³

As the Gerzes provocative counter-monument gradually covered up with graffiti, it was lowered into the ground, a few feet at a time, year upon year, until it disappeared. Audience participation governed the speed of its disappearance, and it invited desecration. The limitations and possibilities of the public monument is made evident from this piece. Vaillancourt's approach to the monument (admittedly many of these were made at an earlier time and under vastly different constraints) carries with it a twist. His belief in the permanence of sculpture is that of a romantic, yet his advocacy of social change and human rights is progressive. As such, his aesthetic preoccupations, (i.e. the way a sculpture is made, the materials, scale and conception of a piece), are conceived of in terms altogether different from his social statement. Yet his sculptures are seen as tools of social change. Likewise, his sense of Quebec's own history is unchanging, inflexible while his sculptural techniques have often emphasized material transformation, instantaneity, speed, rapidity. The 200 ft., 80,000 lb. modernist steel bridge Vaillancourt built at Plessisville in 1990 reveals this artist's command of applied engineering, just as the 500 ft. sea wall he built in San Francisco during his *Québec Libre* project had in the past.

⁹³ W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *Art and the Public Sphere* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1992) 156-159.

While Armand Vaillancourt's work has been purchased by and is in the collections of such museums as the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Musée Rodin in Paris and the Occidental Museum of Art in Tokyo, he has still not had a major solo show of his work in a museum, either in Quebec or Canada. When awarded one of Quebec's most prestigious arts awards, the Prix Paul-Emile Borduas on November 28, 1993, Vaillancourt's acceptance speech *On ne peut pas éteindre les volcans* was broadcast live on Radio Québec. In the speech he railed against the state of Quebec and North American culture, state treatment of artists and the war in Bosnia. A review of the event by Marie-Michèle Cron published in *Le Devoir*, the following week, read, "With Vaillancourt, one never knows where the art starts or where the social engagement ends."⁹⁴ A portion of Vaillancourt's speech follows:

Too High, Too Low, Too Late !

I have been put down for thirty years, like Paul Robeson, the black American singer from the 1950s, for having fought against racial segregation. (...)

I want to share this honour with all the dispossessed of the earth, in shouting my helplessness in the face of the rapes, the social inequalities, the abused children, the tortured, the genocides, the market and trade of organs. How can one

⁹⁴ Marie-Michèle Cron, "Hommage à un pan de notre si oubliée mémoire," *Le Devoir* 4 Dec. 1993: E 8.

remain indifferent to the atrocities of the Gulf War, to those of Bosnia, Haiti, Angola, where 2,000 people die each day, to the invasion of Panama, and finally to the countless injustices done to developing countries? How can we remain indifferent, in the warmth of our homes, seated comfortably in front of the television, looking on as the horrors happening around the world pass before our eyes? How can one advocate art for art's sake, without being concerned about how the well being of some brings about the unhappiness of others? ⁹⁵

Armand Vaillancourt has undeniably been censored because of his political activism, but not for the aesthetic of his sculptures, which as *objects* are revered, particularly with respect to his work from the 1950s to the 1970s. As Richard Bolton states in *Culture Wars: Documents from Recent Controversies in the Arts*: "In the end, censorship of the arts reveals the failure of democratic institutions to articulate and defend the complexity and diversity of the (American) public."⁹⁶ In Canada, these questions of art censorship work both ways, between Canada's two colonial founding peoples but above all, they reaffirm the control of pervasive bureaucracies in both English and French Canada. Cultural policy has little to do with the enlightenment of the masses, be they English,

⁹⁵ Armand Vaillancourt, "On ne peut pas éteindre les volcans," *Inter art actual* 59 (Spring 1994) 16-17.

⁹⁶ Richard Bolton, ed., *Culture Wars: Documents from Recent Controversies in the Arts* (New York: New Press, 1992) 24.

French or new Canadian. For its simultaneous embodiment of traditional values and espousal of avant-gardist, socially progressive views, Vaillancourt's social sculpture stands on the crux of these questions. His activities as an artist have now spanned a period of 50 years, from the emergence of modernist sculpture in Quebec, through the minimalist, conceptual, and postmodern periods. Amid the angst and global relativism of today's era, Vaillancourt's art and sculpture has maintained a kind of cultural integrity and recognition of the plurality of cultural world views as well. Ellen Dissanayake questions this crises in social and aesthetic values in *What is Art For ?* :

Today, for the first time in human history, people are becoming aware of their dependence on cultural frameworks, hence the relativity of these frameworks. They know that there are different realities - not only cultural, but psychological (between individuals) and physical (in the intricacies of matter and our limitations in understanding its ultimate or fundamental nature).⁹⁷

As an artist, Vaillancourt seems remarkably capable of holding two simultaneous points of view, a traditional historical view of society as integral, a corpus of inter-related parts, interactive and with common shared goals and values, and the progressive view that society comprises a multiplicity of viewpoints, of peoples and cultural groups; in a word, that

⁹⁷ Ellen Dissannayake, *What is Art For?* (Seattle: U. of Washington Press, 1989) 185.

viewpoints are singular and pluralistic at one and the same time. In this sense, Vaillancourt's artistic values are both traditional and avant-gardist, and seek an integral unity. Likewise in his approach to materials and techniques of sculpture, Vaillancourt reflects a duplicity of approaches. On the one hand, when working with organic materials, as seen in his bois brûlés, *The Tree of Durocher St.* and *Song of the Nations*, he follows what Peter Bürger in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* calls a "classicist" approach to artmaking. Material is treated as something living. As Bürger states: "Its significance (is) something that has grown from concrete life situations."⁹⁸ When working with non-organic materials such as cast metal, steel and concrete, Vaillancourt follows the avant-gardist approach perceives material is just material. Bürger describes the avant-gardist approach in these terms:

Their activity initially consists in nothing other than killing the 'life' of the material, that is, in tearing it out of its functional context that gives it meaning. Whereas the classicist recognizes and respects in the material the carrier of a meaning, the avant-gardistes see only the empty sign, to which only they can impart significance. The classicist correspondingly treats the material as a whole, whereas the avant-gardist tears it out of the life totality, isolates it, and turns it into a fragment.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1984) 70.

⁹⁹ Bürger 70.

In referencing what he calls the classicist's approach to materials, Bürger remarks:

The classicist produces work with the intent of giving a living picture of the totality. And the classicist pursues this intention even while limiting the represented reality segment to the rendition of an ephemeral mood. The avant-gardist, on the other hand, joins fragments with the intent of positing meaning (where the meaning may well be the message that meaning has ceased to exist). The work is no longer created as an organic whole but put together from fragments.¹⁰⁰

Armand Vaillancourt's social sculpture, his approach to artmaking maintains a kind of cognitive dissonance between a classical point of view and a modernist avant-garde one. His social sculpture, in another configuration, and as an art of protest, is one that relies on the media as its sandbox to challenge the status quo, our public institutions and social structures. If his art is problematic, it is only because contemporary life has become one-dimensional and caught up in a dominant ideology. Yet as Carol Becker states in *The Subversive Imagination* :

Art easily becomes the object of rage and confrontation. At the same time artists, frustrated by the illusion of order and

¹⁰⁰ Bürger 70.

well-being posited by society, or angry at the degree to which they are unappreciated and their work misunderstood, choose rebellion (either through form or content) as a method of retaliation. And in so doing, they separate themselves from those with whom they may long to interact. Hence the need to decolonize the imagination of artists and audience, to force us all to break the paradigms that perpetuate this mutual alienation and keep art from having an impact on society. ¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Carol Becker, ed., *The Subversive Imagination: Artists, Society, & Social Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 1994) xiii.

CONCLUSION

While many of the dichotomies inherent to Armand Vaillancourt's artistic practice may never be resolved, his advocacy of social sculpture and social art is largely enacted with freedom of expression and the rights of the individual in mind. The real uniqueness and social value of his art is less in how he is perceived by the media, the public or the institutions, whether as myth, demagogue or social reformer, than for the fact that his vision of social change remains progressive and his perception of history positive. This positivism is something of an anachronism in today's times and could even be considered by some critics of historicity an oversimplified and generalized attitude to what society, culture or even art might be. The same could be said of his view of nature.

Vaillancourt perceives history in fixed terms, as series of inevitabilities, of causes and effects, and a permanent presence in daily life. He considers the public sculpture and monuments he creates in a similar fashion. Yet the public events he enacts, his proclamations about progressive social change are something distinctly at odds with this. Revolutionary social change embodies notions of a collective and social will, and perceives society as an organism. Vaillancourt began as an artist in the 1950s, an era of profound social change in Quebec. His political vision of Quebec society and advocacy of social democratic values are an odd admixture of pluralism and cultural specificity. The optics through which Armand Vaillancourt perceives society are no different than his approach to materials, which he has always perceived of as something to

be conquered and transformed. If nature, his tough rural upbringing played a role in this perception, his conception of the world in physical terms likewise links him to long standing populist traditions in Quebec society. These always carried with them a cachet of freedom, but the restraining forces of state and church were likewise present. Abstraction became a kind of escape from these traditions, but they were already changing by the time his reputation had become established in the 1960s.

While Vaillancourt's most controversial monuments *Je me souviens* and *Québec Libre*, displayed a considerable mastery of the sculpture monument's relation to surrounding space and architectural form, these are likewise the works that defined him in the public mind as a political artist with nationalist aspirations. The aesthetic concerns we see in these works are structural and architectural as much as sculptural. Their conception, predominantly abstract and highly innovative, has nothing to do with politics. *Hommage aux Amérindiens*, intended as a political statement is both structural and spiritual or interior, in that it uses recuperated precut wood product while referencing native culture whose history has been one of integration into the culture of nature. His manifestations seem to have as much to do with the sculptor's difficult role as a creator whose commissions are subsequently identified with civic, state or museum government. The early works are not at all structural. Instead, they reveals a greater concern with the inherent properties of materials, a search for interiority of meaning and, in the case of the bronzes and Styrofoam cast pieces, they may even be allegorical. As he moves away from publicly funded commissioned work, his monuments achieve social stasis, in that they become implicitly didactic, but here the notion of

labour, of seeking, gathering and assembling materials is inherent to the process. Finally, in *Song of the Nations*, we see a return to interiority, to his early beginnings in wood sculpture, and nature. The materials he uses and the way he presents them within a public gallery context plays on and with the architectural setting but here the political statement is officially sanctioned. Nature becomes an expression of the body politic. The aspect of social protest, long associated with his overtly political works, becomes inclusive, officially sanctioned. Likewise the way he works with the wood, reclaiming it, exposing it to then paint over it, implies an acceptance of, rather than a violence towards materials.

Not everyone may agree with Armand Vaillancourt's social statements, but his role in the development of modernist sculpture in Quebec, and monumental public sculpture in particular, is central. By presenting a chronological accounting of his work over the past four decades, and attempting to explain the processes and language of his art, I hope that I have helped to redress much of the misunderstanding surrounding his life's work not only as a social activist, but also as a highly accomplished sculptor.

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