

# PLAYING WITH FIRE

ARMAND VAILLANCOURT

SOCIAL SCULPTOR

**JOHN K. GRANDE**

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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 and this requires an enlightened mind, in this accelerated universe in which we are submerged, our information must constantly be kept up to date. Kept up to date is not saying enough; it must also be prospective.

The main objective of culture is to give to man sufficient co-operation and a better comprehension of man's plight. The plastic arts serve culture, which is not a vain desire to escape the world, but an extreme application to great knowledge, so as to render man more human. "Our knowledge is too great" said Oppenheimer, "for one man to know a great deal". Just so many threats, they say, for this world, dragged along by the eternal drift of destiny and where reason accounts for everything except man.

One cannot teach the spark of genius which opens vistas on a discovery, not even the obscure formulas which express it; but one can extend the emotion of creativity, the joy that this special line of thought which approaches the unknown shores (realms) expresses. There is a romanticism and aesthetic to the most abstract search that can make the technical language of reason compatible with that of the heart.

Armand Vaillancourt

## Introduction

We live in an era that is simultaneously pluralist and conformist. As a writer whose family founded a town that is now a heritage site called Kinnear's Mills, not at all far from where Armand was born, I found myself naturally interested in Vaillancourt's attitudes to art and society. Indeed, one might say that Vaillancourt's populist expression is part of not only his, but my own heritage. Vaillancourt recounted to me on one of our numerous meetings in the making of this book that his father Donat and his sons would turn up at political meetings and burn hay, beep their car horns in protest if they did not like a politician until he was forced to leave the podium. His father has often told him that one must take action on political issues of concern because if you did not, someone much less capable than you will make the decisions for you. What was once called populism is now called to as radical behaviour and has a social stigma, so estranged from a notion of collectivity have our social norms become. The irony in all this is that my own roots are non-francophone and Vaillancourt's francophone, yet despite this we see eye to eye on many issues regarding the public role of art in society I believe this is precisely because both of us have roots that stretch back in the history of Quebec and Canada.

When I first encountered Armand Vaillancourt at his studio on Esplanade St. in Montreal, with its view of the mountain, I could see a large, as yet uncarved imported African tree trunk. Not far away sitting behind some old oil barrels three metal pieces had the words JUSTICE carved into them. They sat in quiet solitude, like sculptor's talismans intended to guard his studio. The building itself has a roof that itself is theatrical and slightly comical like a grenadier's hat with a pointed spire on top. Entering into Vaillancourt's studio the first thing I noticed were his sculpting tools that he had just taken out of his station wagon; the large mallet covered in duct tape, the adzes and chisels in a large bucket, the vast array of materials, styrofoam, wood, metal and paper prints from his

Manhole series. Looking around I could see a fascinating and diverse array of his works, including his exquisite small bronzes cast in the lost wax technique, some paintings, a maquette for the controversial *Je me souviens* intended for High Park in Toronto but I will tell you about that fiasco later in *Playing with Fire*... There was even a child's swing Vaillancourt had designed, on which Vaillancourt sat while talking, somewhat bemused...

Sitting on a shelf in one corner of this studio, I was surprised to find a tiny set of Shakespeare's works. They were so small as to be almost ludicrous, for the words in them are great and so I already had a clue to this amazing aspect of scale in Vaillancourt's sculpture. And wasn't it Shakespeare who wrote in *Twelfth Night* "This is an art which does mend nature: change it rather; but the art itself is nature."

A clue to Vaillancourt is the sense of drama. It's everywhere. Vaillancourt's life and art have a theatrical flair. The paradoxes that persist in his work stem from his incurable curiosity and spontaneity. He is a child of the 1960s, but one who had already made a name for himself in the 1950s with the *Tree of Durocher St.* There is a contradiction between the public Vaillancourt, the *Don Quixote* of Quebec's arts scene and the quiet poetic soul that is at the heart of his art and of which we know very little about. Vaillancourt recently had full colour pictures of himself not as sculptor but as the model in a magazine called *WALLPAPER* that has as its credo "The stuff that surrounds you"! for *Tristan & America*, imagine a creator turning full circle on himself to become ... the model. But then he turns full circle again to become social activist! At the *Musee d'art contemporain de Montreal's* conference for the *declics: art et societe* show (Quebec art of the 1960s and 1970s) that included works Vaillancourt himself had made decades ago.

Vaillancourt protested a major cigarette manufacturer's sponsorship for the exhibition. He claimed they were directly responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of people in North America annually. After contesting

this, he made a cross sign with his arms and then walked out of the museum. Some audience members cheered, others booed. During the 9th edition of the Presences autochtones native arts festival in Montreal in May 1999, Vaillancourt again became the subject of artmaking. this time his body was wrapped in canvas (an allusion to the body as art?). His hair and "clothing" were then painted by native participants in a gesture of cultural solidarity and acceptance.

To bring this book together, I had to go behind the mask of Armand Vaillancourt's public image, to try and find out what make him tick. I was surprised to find a pleasant, engaging and thoughtful individual, whose commitment to the creative impulse has gone far beyond the ordinary, even remarkable. In a letter to then Quebec Minister of Cultural Affairs Madame Lise Bacon dated 30 April 1988, Vaillancourt writes:

"How does one explain that an artist who has worked so intensively all his life for public causes, who has influenced many generations of artists, who has given, finds himself, after almost 60 years, almost completely disarmed of any means to continue working?"<sup>1</sup>

In this same letter Vaillancourt provided his own answer, and, in the light of his experience, it is a justifiable one:

"Unfortunately in a society that prides itself on being called democratic, pluralist, open, the strongest, the most dedicated to the survival of our planet quite often violently oppressed.

Our governments should seek to preserve our natural wealth, of which I as an artist consider myself part ." <sup>2</sup>

The 1960s adage that "the personal is political" might now be re-phrased as "the political is personal". Where are the public forums for public debate that lie at the heart of the democratic process? The notion that the private sector should operate like a public one has enabled the media to invade the private sphere of all aspects of our lives. Somehow the charisma of the communal, public sphere has likewise been broken. We are left with a dog

eat dog mentality, both in private and public arenas of the arts. Where is the cherished notion of society in artistic activity and expression?

Current artistic expression often expresses notions of hybridity, of nihilism, or most often a postModern malaise for which no remedy is offered. The conditions of modern life are reflected in these works, but the patient's illness is neither prevented nor treated, merely described. There is a lack of direction in many artists' representations of what I would call a "formal notion of what creativity is". The whole process has become all too self-conscious.

Armand Vaillancourt's art and life reflect a dedication to social concerns through direct action. Indeed, Vaillancourt actually ran for the NDP in the English bastion of Westmount-St Louis riding during 1994 Quebec election. The only artist to run for public office in the entire province, he was attracted by the party's claim that the state should serve the artist. Since the NDP became the *Partie de la democratie sociale*, Vaillancourt again ran for them in the establishment Outremont riding and gathered over 500 votes, itself surprising given the venue. In an article published in *Le Devoir*, Yves Robillard, professor and author of *Quebec Underground*:

"Today's 'scandalous' works (of art ...) wound us. Do we need to be wounded in an era when all one talks of is 'cuts'? Art is an invention that has divided the society into two, the creators on the one side, and the spectators on the other, it's indecent!" 3

Armand Vaillancourt's contribution to the history of modernist sculpture in Quebec is undeniable. His *bois brule* 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 Rene Levesque giving up in 1984 what he calls the "beau risque". When Vaillancourt was offered the Governor General's Award in 1967, he refused it, but because it had already been mailed to him, he kept it. Such are the ironies that continually resurface in Vaillancourt's life.

Armand Vaillancourt's artistic career has certainly had its ups and downs. We may be aware of individual works he has created, or events he has participated or instigated, but we seldom are given the opportunity to look at his life and art in its entirety. 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 still believes that the artist can play a significant role as catalyst in raising social awareness of issues, he is part of a minority in Quebec, which is itself a minority in Canada. Vaillancourt has constantly fought for freedom of expression and the rights of individuals, yet is also a Quebec nationalist. This makes his perception of the creative process an interesting one seen through the lens of the Canadian mosaic. English Canada is largely unaware of this, in part because their media presents a distorted view of the realities of life in Quebec.

Vaillancourt's abstract sculptures from the 1950s and 1960s are in most major Canadian museum collections yet as a person he has been marginalized by the institutions in the museum and public art gallery nexus. Contradictions like this make his place in the history of art all the more essential, for he is still with us and very active. During the war in Kosovo, he participated in the Montreal marches each Saturday that sought to speed up the West's involvement in the war so as to avert the catastrophe that was taking place. Yet another irony in Vaillancourt's life, if one considers his statements about war when he created the *Monument aux Morts* (Chicoutimi, 1958) or consider his powerful and

controversial abstract sculpture for Asbestos (1963) conceived as a response to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Now 70 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 Dokumenta in Germany.

Few artists have had such extensive media coverage as Vaillancourt, as much for the controversy he arouses and the image of the artist he presents as for the aesthetic of his sculpture. Because his career has been so controversial there is virtually no comprehensive assessment of Vaillancourt's life's work as a social sculptor. Legends are born and die with the media. In *Playing with Fire*, I hope to go behind the sculptor's mask so as to present an unbiased look at Armand Vaillancourt's life and art. In so doing, I hope to provide some insight into the context of Quebec sculpture and the process of Vaillancourt's artistic practice.

The social and cultural values Vaillancourt has espoused through his art: nationalism, defense of human rights, political prisoners, women's rights, and ecology, appear all the more ambiguous in this era of pluralism, for the pluralism of our era perceives everyone as an individual and a nobody at the same time. Carol Becker, in her essay *Survival of the Artist in the New Political Climate*, states:

"Having recognized the collapse of the art market, many artists are making a greater commitment to connect, to reach out, to ask serious questions about who constitutes a community, which communities one wants to be part of, and which communities one wants one's work to reach, it would be wonderful if the gallery, performance or design worlds could support artists economically, but there is now little illusion that the marketplace will ever sustain most artists' souls. There must be a connection to something larger, it is precisely when artists reach out and wrestle with difficult issues in the public sector in the hope of making a public statement, however, that they get in trouble with the greater

society.”<sup>4</sup>

Who knows about trouble better than Armand Vaillancourt? He has been trying to enact social change for decades. His recent projects involving art in the schools have included a 110 foot long mural collectively made by the students at the Elan Primary School in the east end of Montreal, "We chose our colours at Betonel. We got it at a good price: \$160 for 26 gallons!" Vaillancourt later jokingly told a La Presse journalist.<sup>5</sup> 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 brule 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 developed. Vaillancourt's sculptures embrace a social aesthetic of liberation and all that avant-gardism implies.

Context is very important. Vaillancourt's 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 Quebecois 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. Armand Vaillancourt's art leads one to such central issues of aesthetics and nationalism, the monument's relation to modernity and postModernism.

## The Early Years

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 at St-Ferdinand d'Halifax with no electricity or indoor toilet from the age of three. He was the son of a former trade unionist and prospector who had opened several mines.\*" During the Depression, his father Donat bought the Black Lake farm to ensure the family's security in hard times.^ 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. Vaillancourt's remembrance of the distant sound of church bells far off in the distance in rural Quebec in the mid-winter of the 1930s, can be naturally linked as memories to the sound environments and performances he would later engage in as an artist.<sup>8</sup>

In a 1969 interview, 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.<sup>9</sup>

Again in a talk given with the sculpture students at College Brebeuf in 1987 Vaillancourt refers to his childhood: "We lived a kind of extraordinary poetry. All the energy that I have today I owe in a large part to what I gathered as baggage during my childhood, my adolescence and as a young man on the farm." <sup>10</sup>

At his country residence near Plessisville in 1999, while talking to Armand about this childhood one windy day, he

gestured while in conversation and pointed to a field nearby and said:

"When I was a young man, I would plow a field like that by hand with horses, it would take about 45 minutes to plow one row. It was a constant struggle with the earth, obstacles, one on one, almost a zen-like experience. You had to develop an incredible patience and were, of course, in direct contact with the earth." 11

In his early years, Vaillancourt was asked by his father to carry a coffin by horseback from St. Ferdinand d'Halifax to Black Lake. He had to cross the Becancour river and follow William Lake to get there. The pony was just two years old, and while climbing a hill, the exhausted horse fell back and the coffin, with the body of deceased in it, slid off. A farmer nearby lent him another horse and he eventually arrived at Black Lake in the pitch dark night. The scene recalled the famous Quebec film *Mon Oncle Antoine* but in this case was real life! Such experiences must have profoundly affected his approach to artmaking. The influence can be found in the near minimalist wood sculptures he was later to create in the 1950s out of wood. Their simplicity of line and conception undoubtedly drew on these early experiences.

In the late 1940s, Vaillancourt worked on boats on Lake Memphremagog, as well as on the Great Lakes and at sea, voyaging to South America, Labrador, the Gulf of Mexico and New York. At the age of 19, after his family sold their farm, he seriously considered such a seaman's career. On one such trip, Vaillancourt and one other sailor discharged a cargo of bronze ingots for 53 hours without stopping.<sup>12</sup> 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."<sup>13</sup> 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. During the years 1949

and 1950, Vaillancourt took classical studies at the University of Ottawa and had begun premedical studies, living in Hull for one year and then on Creighton St. in Rockliffe adjacent to the Governor General of Canada's Residence. He was not at all happy with his chosen direction, and left to spend nine months in solitude in the Eastern Townships during which time he spoke to no one, reflecting on his future. A young woman, Monique Archambault, saw his drawings and thought he had talent, suggesting he enroll in an art school. It was then Vaillancourt chose to move to Montreal and in 1951, chose the Ecole des Beaux-arts and studied art there until 1954. During the years 1953-54, he was President of the Student Association at the Ecole des Beaux-arts, not only for Fine Arts but also for Architecture.<sup>14</sup> Alice Nolin, one of his teachers at the Ecole could not have been a worse judge of character when she told him "I think you're good in colour, but you'll never become a sculptor."<sup>15</sup> During drawing class, Vaillancourt sought to develop his own language of forms, and would apply so much force his pencil would literally go through the paper.<sup>16</sup>

At the Ecole, Vaillancourt was a continuous experimenter, welding scraps of metal into mobiles, burning styrofoam and filling it with coloured rocks, burning designs onto exposed film, then projecting the images on a screen, using a vast variety of materials and techniques. Other students used to call him Picasso, though he did not know who Picasso was at the time. Less well known in that Vaillancourt did religious studies as well as traditional classical works in this early period, eventually moving into pure abstraction.

## **The Tree of Durocher St.**

Paul-Emile Borduas' Refus Global published in 1948 marked a significant break with the insular Catholic traditions of Quebec's past and initiated the beginning of a movement that became known as Automatism whose members included Francoise Sullivan, Jean-Paul Riopelle, Claude Gauvreau, Bruno Cormier and Fernand Leduc. in Refus Global Borduas wrote:

"Break permanently with the customs of society, dissociate yourself from the utilitarian values. Refuse to live knowingly beneath the level of our spiritual and physical potential. Refuse to close your eyes to the vices, the frauds perpetrated under the guise of learning, favour or gratitude. Refuse to live in the isolation of the artistic ghetto, a place fortified but too easily shunted aside. (...)

MAKE WAY FOR MAGIC!  
MAKE WAY FOR OBJECTIVE MYSTERIES!  
MAKE WAY FOR LOVE!  
MAKE WAY FOR NECESSITIES!"            17

Less than a month after the publication of Refus Global, Paul Sauve, Quebec's minister of social welfare and youth informed Borduas he had lost his teaching job at the Ecole du Meuble. Alfred Pellan's anti-Automatist Prisme d'yeux group was formed the same year and included Leon Bellefleur and Albert Dumouchel among its early members. These events marked the true beginnings of the 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, particularly 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;

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." 18

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."19

Although Vaillancourt maintained no active ties with the Automatists, he played the role of a doctor in a one-act farce titled *La mort de monsieur Borduas* (The Death of Mr. Borduas). Designated roles in Perron's play included Françoise Sullivan, Claude Gauvreau, Jean Lefebvre and Jean-Paul Mousseau. *La mort de monsieur Borduas* was written in 1949 by Jacques Perron, 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 Guilbault's car by drinking various brightly coloured pigments. In the final scene, that character who plays Borduas enters with Muriel Guilbault, very

much alive. While 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." 20

The irony inherent to 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 but ironically never participated in Automatist events despite the fact that his work embodies the spirit of Automatism even to this day, perhaps moreso than the original co-signators. In an article titled *Refus, non, creatiuite, oui* in referring to Vaillancourt's sense of expressionism of matter Yves Robillard affirmed these sentiments; "The person who has never ceased to embody the sense of the universal in the Refus Global message, was never an Automatist: it is Armand Vaillancourt. Early on, he was obliged to confront people's opinions, because his sculptures were in the public sphere." 21

Vaillancourt effectively brought a dying city tree back to life and reconfigured it as an artwork, when he initiated the sculpture that was to make him famous that became known as *The Tree of Durocher St.* He had already observed this magnificent tree, an elm that had been destroyed during a storm, while a student at the *Ecole des Beaux-arts* during one of the many walks he would take in the streets of Montreal and on Mount Royal, occasionally accompanied by Vittorio, an artist who would later make his name as a designer and caricaturist.

One day Vaillancourt decided he would like to make a sculpture out of that tree. He began to work on it in 1953, right where it was located on Durocher St. just above Sherbrooke St. West in Montreal. Cutting and carving with hand tools and an axe, sculpting with burners, and burning sections the tress became a focal

point for his energies for two years beginning in 1953. The Tree of Durocher Street became a sort of ongoing performance. For two years the residents of the McGill Ghetto area would see him at work as they went to work, came home, just as visitors, bystanders would enter into dialogues with him about what exactly he was doing. The tree became a vehicle for engaging the public over the notion of what art could be.

As Vaillancourt sculpted out of doors before crowds of onlookers, the spectacle caused his name and reputation to spread. In an article titled *Aventures et Mesaventures des Sculptures Environnementales au Quebec 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.<sup>22</sup> Robert Roussil's *La Famille* (1949) predates Vaillancourt's work for controversy but remains an essentially figurative sculpture with elements of abstraction. Some time after completing the piece Vaillancourt revealed something of his rural roots when he said, "I wanted to keep the beautiful form of that tree. But I also wanted to put my mark on it. Every material is good, it's only the way we see it and use it that's bad."<sup>23</sup>

Some time after *The Tree of Durocher St.* was completed, 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 lie Notre-Dame. It remained there until August 1976 when it was sold to the Musee nationale des beaux-Arts du Quebec for \$26,000, whereupon it was installed near the brasserie Le Gobelet on rue Saint-Laurent in Montreal.<sup>24</sup> It is now permanently situated in the new Musee nationale des beaux- Arts du Quebec.

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 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 Trinite 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-Napoleon 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.

Louis Jobin's ice sculptures for the Quebec Winter Carnivals of 1894 and 1896 represented famous figures from Quebec's history: Monseigneur Francois de Laval, Frontenac, Father Jean de Brebeuf and Champlain. A colossal statue of Liberty Lighting up the World, again weighing 7000 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.<sup>25</sup> As events that attracted crowds during their production, and 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.

## **Abstraction & Sculptural Process**

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 brule 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 *Quebec 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 actions 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 Hemon's *Maria Chapdeleine*. 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 vice grip 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 brule, iron, wax, antlers. Styrofoam ... and now cement.<sup>26</sup>

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 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.<sup>27</sup>

## La Place des Arts

A wide open show in May 1953 including over eighty artists' works was held at the recently created La Place des Arts studio Robert Roussil and Armand Vaillancourt shared at 1199 Bleury at Ste. Catherine St. West with Jacques Huet and Roland Diné. 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 the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts' annual Spring Show in importance.<sup>28</sup>

Despite the reputation for innovation, some claim La Place des Arts did not allow women to work in the space.<sup>29</sup> But one thing is sure, Vaillancourt later introduced Frangoise Sullivan (Refus Global co-signator, experimental dancer and artist) to the practice of metal sculpture by demonstrating arc-welding techniques to her at La Place des Arts in 1959. <sup>29</sup>

In an interview with Gerald Godin published in *L'art et l'état*, Robert Roussil described La Place des Arts as a kind of worker's university comprising people from all milieus, "a revolutionary adventure".<sup>30</sup>

One of the people who helped establish and support La Place des Arts, along with Roussil and Vaillancourt, was Henri Gagnon, a union organizer and the Head of the Communist Party of Quebec.<sup>31</sup> 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 to become Vice-President of the Association des Arts Plastiques a Montreal which he co-founded with Robert Roussil in the Spring of 1956. 32 Poetry, jazz, performance, teaching and artistic ventures of many kinds took place with great regularity at La Place des Arts. There was a continual flow of artists in and out of the place including Daudelin, Jordi Bonet, Yves Trudeau and others. After La Place des Arts was closed one autumn by police under the infamous Maurice Duplessis Padlock Law, the action being sanctioned by Montreal mayor Camilien Houde, Vaillancourt stayed on squatting there until end of February with no heat or electricity. In an interview with Gazette columnist Nick auf der Maur, Roussil commented:

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 to become artistic director of the Stratford Festival and the National Arts Centre). Not only did they close us down, but they took the name of the studio when they built Place des Arts.<sup>33</sup>

Years later Vaillancourt returned to rent La Place des Arts. His companion at that time, Suzanne McAllister (who inspired then Montreal poet Leonard Cohen to write the poem *Suzanne Wears a Leather Jacket*, later published in his *Selected Poems 1956-1968*, as well as the famous song *Suzanne*), convinced Vaillancourt to let her move in with him. The two stayed in a studio at the former site of La Place des Arts for four years but when part of the place collapsed, they had to move on.

## Real Public Art

Some 22 years ago, Vaillancourt wrote that cultural revolution must precede economic and political revolution, in his personal writings he reflect 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."<sup>34</sup> Vaillancourt participated in the committee for the defense of Jacques and Paul Rose and worked to help felquistes considered political prisoners to get out of prison. He would later participate in the committee for the defense of the expropriated farm lands surrounding Mirabel in 1984. Vaillancourt's point of view was no different from Robert Roussil's in the period of the mid-1960s but later their visions diverged. The Quiet Revolution in Quebec orchestrated from above was now being challenged, and a popular grassroots mouvement populaire arose that advocated animation sociale.<sup>35</sup> Michel Martin, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Musee du Quebec, 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. <sup>36</sup>

As activist artists, they liad 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, the Junior Chamber of Commerce of Chicoutimi, in the Saguenay-Lac St-Jean region of Quebec asked Vaillancourt to design a war memorial. "I told them that I wasn't going to do one of those things with one soldier knifing another. If they wanted me, they would have to take my work as it came."<sup>37</sup>

Work on Monument aux Morts began in September and by Remembrance Day in November the three ton abstract- styled memorial was ready. Upon completion. Monument aux Morts aroused a great deal of controversy, but primarily for aesthetic, rather than political reasons. Consisting of a multiplicity of cut metal pieces 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., focused on the real world phenomena of human conflict and war. While one writer in Time Magazine referred to it as "a bristling jungle of scrap metal that lunges skyward like an anti-aircraft gun"<sup>38</sup> Yves Robillard, in an unpublished essay on Vaillancourt, 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."<sup>39</sup>

During 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.<sup>40</sup> Vaillancourt's response: "You don't get the sense or the nonsense of war by seeing a soldier on the ready, or a tank. I

wanted to show the forces of war bursting in all directions."<sup>41</sup> 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 inferiority, reflection, even inherently spiritual notions such as truth to materials. An early Untitled wood sculpture from the collection of the Musée nationale des beaux-arts 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 reference the surrounding space. 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 nationale des beaux-arts du Québec already have a rough geometry in their surface carving."<sup>42</sup>

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 *Écritures* (1957), created for the exterior of the Collège français in Montreal and that still adorns the school, proves otherwise. Vaillancourt himself states: "I began making welded metal pieces with cut steel forms as early as 1955 at my Prefontaine-Notre Dame studio in Montreal."<sup>43</sup> The smaller scaled *Sculpture No. 1* (ca. 1960-61) in the National Gallery of Canada collection has the same sense of lyrical abstraction, a kind of calligraphic signology or abstract writing in

metal

that is intuitively musical as *Ecritures*. 44

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 new structural preoccupation emerging in Vaillancourt's unrealized project *Je me souviens* (1967), commissioned for High Park in Toronto. This becomes absolute in *Quebec 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.

## The 1960s: Music + Sculpture + Dance + Rhythm

In an interview with Denise 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."<sup>45</sup> Vaillancourt's cast bronze plaques, exhibited at the Galerie Denyse Deirue in 1957 in a two person show with Jean-Pierre Beaudoin, evidence this. These hand-forged sculptures hung suspended in the gallery inviting spectators to clash them together to experience the deep, chiming sounds they made. Not just object sculptures, but equally a kind of invented musical instrument, the plaques encouraged a new kind of interaction between spectator and artwork. The years 1958, 1959 and 1960, saw Armand Vaillancourt further expanding the horizons of his art activities by participating in dance spectacles with Suzanne Verdal at the Centre Canadien d'Essai de Montreal.<sup>46</sup> By 1961, the same year he held his first solo show outside Quebec at Dorothy Cameron's Here and Now Art Gallery in Toronto, Vaillancourt was creating what he still refers to as the most daring show of his life, "an orgy with matter" for the international Festival of Contemporary Music in Montreal."<sup>47</sup> Vaillancourt recounts:

We gathered one night at an apartment on Sherbrooke St. West with Francoise 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 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.' 48

The musical environment Vaillancourt created for the event comprised some twenty two tons of self-created musical instruments (the plaques were included), 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.<sup>49</sup>

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.<sup>50</sup> These instantaneous sounds were combined with preregistered tape recordings of studio sounds and Pierre Mercure's live musical composition. Yoko Ono even 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.<sup>51</sup> On hearing about Vaillancourt's sound/sculpture performance from Pierre Mercure, Edgar Varese whose *Poeme electronique* was presented in absentia at the International Festival of Contemporary Music in Montreal, invited Armand Vaillancourt to perform in Greenwich Village, New York, but he did not accept the offer.<sup>52</sup>

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. He was a memorable figure riding his motorbike, with long hair and beard and all this added to his growing reputation. 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 Monument aux Morts 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. Osias Poirier, manager of the Asbestos newspaper *Le Citoyen*, stated: "In 20 years it might be beautiful, but not right now."<sup>53</sup> The excess metal from overflow during casting and cooling was left on the sculpture as the upper part of the piece.

Armand considered his sculpture to be a critique of the nuclear threat, an event 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."<sup>54</sup> 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 Armand Vaillancourt 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.<sup>55</sup> 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 brule, the Asbestos sculpture in transit from Montreal to Asbestos, Vaillancourt riding a motorbike, and the Asbestos piece installed on site. A feature article titled *Pour Armand Vaillancourt, la sculpture est un combat a finir contre la matiere* in *Perspectives* again reaffirms the myth:

This man, now 30 years old, is not like any body else. He is a unique phenomena, 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."<sup>56</sup>

## Action Casting Happenings

Styrofoam casting was a process of creating shapes in an instant out of whereupon these were cast into metal. Vaillancourt innovated with this process as early as 1954-55 in his Prefontaine-Notre Dame studio in the east end of Montreal and claims he was the first in the world to use it.<sup>57</sup>

The Prefontaine-Notre Dame studio was a hive of activity and industry. Barrels full of bones collected by Vaillancourt when he worked for a spell at Canada packers sat amid sculptures, found materials and any number of things. The studio was a place of experimentation that undoubtedly upset the status quo in a still strict and largely conventional working class area of Montreal. Young school children from a Catholic school around the corner were told bypass Vaillancourt's studio, to go to school on any other street than the one the studio was located on as a nude sculpture of a woman stood outside for by-passers to see.

The casting technique initiated at Vaillancourt's studio at this time has since been adopted by sculptors worldwide, because this fairly rudimentary and accessible technique enables sculptors to work in a large scale. During casting, which takes place in a steel form, the hot metal fills the surface forms made on the styrofoam, then cools. 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.<sup>58</sup>

Jackson Pollock's sense of being in the artwork is similar to Armand Vaillancourt's principle of direct action and use of available materials. Vaillancourt's innovations with styrofoam forms subsequently 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 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.<sup>59</sup>

Spontaneous and fluid yet controlled by the artist's motions, styrofoam cast sculpture resulted in sculptural forms much like those in nature. Ambiguous, fluid, and very abstract, they allowed a variety of interpretations from different perspectives, and embodied transformation. All this was manifested in solid, three-dimensional form and permanent materials. Andre 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".<sup>60</sup>

One sees the beginnings of geometric form in

Vaillancourt's sculpture *La force* (1964), created for the 1st International Sculpture Symposium in Montreal.<sup>61</sup> This sculpture, created using an impromptu out-of-doors atelier near Beaver Lake on Montreal's 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*, which still stands on Mont Royal, establishes a rapport between the sculpture as object but also with the park environment surrounding it. 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 looks like a statement on the close ties that exist between humanity and nature.

The public was witness to a similar live casting "spectacle" in a lot adjacent to Vaillancourt's sculpture foundry on Frontenac St. north of Rachel in the east end of Montreal on December 1965. The futurist poet Claude Pelouquin gave a reading from his latest unbound book of poems titled *Colorifere*, saying "Don't call it a book. It's an object."<sup>62</sup> 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 550 pounds of burning metal rose ten, then fifty feet in the air. The last guests to arrive were the crews of three Montreal fire wagons and five police cars."<sup>63</sup> Nine people were slightly hurt at the live sculpture cast, and four cars and twenty nine windows of an adjoining factory building were smashed. This was one "live casting" that 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 fictive style:

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 shoveling 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-coloured flame was hovering over the top of the furnace, like the tongues of fire in the Gospels.<sup>64</sup>

La Nuit des Etoiles, an event most who attended will never forget was held at Jarry Park in north Montreal on July 23, 1965, the night before Quebec's national St. Jean Baptiste holiday. Organized by Germaine Dugas, the event attracted 100,000 people. Pauline Julien and other big name artists sang for the event. At one of the four kiosks, Vaillancourt undertook another live sculpture casting while an amazed audience watched, it was the Quebec poet Gaston Miron who gave one of the sculptures made during the event *Chien du Quebec*. It now sits in Carre St. Louis just off St. Denis St. in Montreal. Purportedly the title derived from Canadian Father of Confederation Sir John A. MacDonald's comment that Louis Riel would be hung even if all the dogs of Quebec barked. Another of the works cast there was later purchased by Pierre Peladeau and is now in the collection of Quebecor.

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 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 canceled. 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"<sup>65</sup>

Asked to comment on Vaillancourt's High Park piece at the time, 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."<sup>66</sup> Twelve years later, Toronto's mayor David Crombie asked Armand 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. Until recently it sat in pieces in a field near Côteau-du-Lac, close to the location of the atelier Vaillancourt bought in 1966 from the Government of Quebec, awaiting a final installation site. Vaillancourt claims that in repossessing it, the Quebec government stole it from him. Vaillancourt's deposit payment for the purchase of the Côteau-du-Lac atelier was blocked and his sculpture foundry, the best equipped in the country at the time, was destroyed. He has never received any compensation.<sup>67</sup>

Early in 2000, while driving by Côteau-du-lac, Vaillancourt discovered that his sculpture had disappeared from the field where it had sat for years, apparently to be melted down as scrap metal, it is not clear who initiated this or why.

As part of events at Expo '67, the World's Fair held on Île Ste. Helene, 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 Guite, 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 strong abstraction of Vaillancourt's wall environment recalls the organic shapes and contours of his bois brules sculptures. This time these forms are transferred into concrete.

The wall piece was environmental in inspiration, even architectural, and 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. *Ecran d'acier*, the title of this Expo '67 piece references the fact that it is a screen of cast steel. 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". One should note that the general tone of Lord's writing on Canadian sculpture at Expo was negative. Barry Lord considered the exhibition to be a reflection of the "retarded" state of art in Canada. 68 More favourable criticism came from William Withrow, then Director of the Art Gallery of Ontario, who immediately recognized Vaillancourt's concrete wall mural to be one of the most successful works of sculpture commissioned at Expo. (69)

Returning to the sculpture *Je me souviens*, what becomes most apparent, is that the incompleteness of this project in Toronto was truly unfortunate for the history

of Canadian and Quebec sculpture, if Vaillancourt had been able to complete the piece for High Park, it would have been one of the greatest, if not the greatest public sculptures to embody principles of abstraction, in terms of scale and the action casting process that Vaillancourt used at the time. The essential tragedy behind all of this is that the rejection of Vaillancourt's Toronto sculpture was largely due to its provocative title and not because of any aesthetic.

The conception and potential execution would have been unquestionably excellent. This work embodied many of the principles found in Quebec automatisme but with a great physical vitality and an epic scale. Je me souviens was as cutting edge an abstract work as anywhere, and unprecedented in modernist sculpture in Canada at the time. Je me souviens was as freely conceived as Vaillancourt's Embarcadero fountain sculpture Quebec Libre! in San Francisco. It would have been a formidable example of Quebec and Canada's capacity to create some of the finest original contemporary sculpture anywhere in the world. Canada's inability to celebrate its home grown talent caused mediocrity to triumph yet again, for the most paltry of political technicalities - a title!

## **Quebec Libre! ... Frisco Style!**

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 how to apply 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 Summer of Love (which lasted roughly from 1965 to 1967) established Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco as a hippy haven. But it was starting to change by the time Armand moved there. This was partly due to the prevalence of hard drugs (something Vaillancourt was always against) and in part because Bill Graham, promoter of the Fillmore and warlord of the Bay area rock scene had begun to turn the local music scene commercial. While the Haight once fiercely supported its own rock bands, they were gradually being usurped by Bill Graham's push to turn the music scene into a commercial venture. By the summer of 1968 things turned ugly. The Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the recent assassination of Martin Luther King in Memphis on April 4th, and the deterioration of black-white racial relations all added to a feeling of civil strife. Demonstrations were taking place everywhere, and at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, demonstrators were brutally attacked by the Chicago police.

In response to poor health conditions for new born children in the United States, Vaillancourt opened up part of his studio as the People's Birth Hospital. He took an ad in a newspaper to sell his Thunderbird sculpture

to fund it. The \$12,000 proceeds from the sale of the sculpture were used to help with the birth hospital which facilitated proper care for newborns in the district. At the time Vaillancourt hung around with a guy called Gypsy Booth, a vegetarian who made and sold health candy bars on the street.

The San Francisco sculpture 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 feet below grade, when fully functioning, the fountain circulates 30,000 gallons of water a minute, which it pours out through various spouts and has a cascade, but restrictions on the use of water due to drought have meant less water has been used recently. 70 Writing in *Contemporary Canadian Art*, Canadian art historian David Burnett, stated that Vaillancourt's Embarcadero Plaza sculpture fountain "looks like the result of some massive disaster or a warning of physical and cultural upheaval."<sup>71</sup> Titled *Quebec Libre*, the piece is better known in the United States than it is in Canada. Like the concrete wall mural Vaillancourt conceived for Montreal's Expo '67, the San Francisco sculpture fountain establishes a rapport with the immediate built environment of the surrounds. The language is architectural, but it uses structures in a highly sophisticated, three-dimensional and 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 any Canadian or Quebec sculptor of his generation, for the vastness of its scale and use of mass. The San Francisco commission maintains a gestural, musical sense, even despite the immensity of its scale, it is a kind of spontaneous abstraction akin to action painting, 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.

Merging social activism with his concrete commission, Vaillancourt stenciled the words Quebec 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 Quebec Libre on again numerous times. With Thomas Moving, 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!"<sup>72</sup> 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 Moving 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".<sup>73</sup> Before the inauguration, landscape architect Lawrence Halprin

defended Vaillancourt's creation calling it, "One of the great works of civic art that has been created in this country."<sup>74</sup> Allan Temko, conservative architecture critic for the San Francisco Chronicle resorted to calling Halprin an artistic-type, eco-architect who "wears jewelry and a beard". Temko went on to comment that "Vaillancourt's original concept, before it was Halprinized, was foolish enough - calling for widely diffused concrete toadstools weakly exuding fluids - but at least it did not oppose the nature of water in this deliberately uncouth way." Temko was completely misinformed.<sup>75</sup> Vaillancourt had already made a maquette for Embarcadero Plaza before going to High Park in Toronto. Rectangular elements similar to the High Park piece were used in the conception of the piece, but finally Vaillancourt decided to use concrete. Temco, in his San Francisco Chronicle article, in questioning the engineering of the piece and whether it would stand the test of time ended up being absolutely wrong. Five hundred and twenty tons of steel were used in its construction with a 5 foot thick slab of steel underneath. Tension cables were used and plates of Corten steel were welded together within the structure under the concrete surfaces.

At the 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".<sup>76</sup> His involvement with Black activists and anti-Vietnam gestures during his stay in California confirmed his ongoing social and cultural commitments in Quebec. 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.<sup>77</sup>

Several years later another 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."<sup>78</sup> The press in Quebec treated Vaillancourt's exploits in San Francisco with an admixture of astonishment and revelation, but seldom discussed Quebec Libre in terms of its aesthetics.

Controversy has continued to surround Quebec Libre. Shortly after the stock market crash in 1987, the Irish rock group U2 gave a free performance in San Francisco's financial district. The show was nicknamed the Save the Yuppie concert by band member Bono who, wearing a hat, said, "We'll be passing it around later. We've already got one man who donated a three-piece suit and a briefcase." At the end of the concert before an enthusiastic crowd Bono climbed Vaillancourt's fountain sculpture and spray painted in red "Stop the traffic. Rock and Roll" on it.

When San Francisco mayor Dianne Feinstein heard of the defacement of Vaillancourt's sculpture, she issued a statement that read; "I am very disappointed that a rock star who is supposed to be a role model for young people chose to vandalize the work of another artist. The unfortunate incident marred an otherwise wonderful rock concert enjoyed by 20,000 people. Defacing public property is malicious mischief under Section 594 of the state penal code, a misdemeanor punishable by a fine or jail or both." (source: [www.atu2.com](http://www.atu2.com)) Rock promoter Bill Graham, who later paid to have the spray paint removed suggested to Bono that he call up the creator of the fountain sculpture. When Bono called up Vaillancourt in Montreal, asking him 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. Vaillancourt defended Bono's actions in stating, "Graffiti is a very necessary disease. Young people don't have the access to front pages that politicians do."<sup>79</sup>

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"<sup>80</sup> 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.

Arts Commission President Debra Lehane, manager of the City of San Francisco's art collection, who has extensively 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."<sup>81</sup> The dilemma over artist's rights surrounding Quebec Libre's aesthetic, historic and civic importance was unresolved for some time. A committee for the defense of Vaillancourt's sculpture strongly contested the proposed removal the sculpture as did the City of San Francisco, which originally paid him \$18,000 to build it, has now decided to preserve it and build a park around it.

## Quebec, Quebec

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 Theatre 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 Theatre principally because the ceramic wall mural (which dealt with themes of death, life and liberty) included the phrase from the poet Claude Pelouquin: "Vous etes pas ecoeures de mourir, bande de caves, c'est assez!"

Roger 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 Theatre, organized by the Committee for the Defense of the mural.

The issues raised by the petition of support for Bonet 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 and read a text about revolution for the occasion. 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, it was widely covered in the press, in

the same way Vaillancourt's *Asbestos, Je me souviens* and *Quebec Libre* controversies had been. The artist cultivated this image of "what the artist should be", feeding the press with an image for public consumption.<sup>82</sup> 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. " 83

In *L'art et l'état*, published in 1973, Robert 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 that both he and Vaillancourt had shared over the years:

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. 84

The subject of Robert Roussil's book, art and the state, was precisely the theme of a pan-Canadian Conference of the Arts held in Montreal in February 1973. The conference aroused considerable uproar in the arts community, and brought then young playwright Michel Tremblay, as well as Robert Roussil and Armand Vaillancourt together again in public, though the two sculptors' careers had moved in different directions.<sup>85</sup> Vaillancourt arrived in a suit of armour and read a petition signed by Quebec artists

protesting the lack of recognition for Quebec unique cultural position within the Canadian Confederation. Ironically the conference was held in the Queen Elizabeth Hotel! A major bone of contention was the lack of independent cultural funding for the Province of Quebec, and an arm's length policy for Quebec cultural funding. The front common was very active in Quebec during the years 1973-75 and they sought to enact profound cultural and social change. They were, in Vaillancourt's words, "like a family" that included the Union des artistes, musicians, painters, and many people with diverse backgrounds and talents. This was an era of great social optimism about change in Quebec and the actions were continuous. Some of the goals they sought, such as self-determination for Quebec culture have been achieved, but the changes have been felt perhaps more in Quebec's cultural institutions than in the culture itself.

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 weighing between 30 and 40 tons each, he created a base, or field, and then went on to assemble rocks into cage-like structures. The work was titled Intempord and 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.

## Here, There and Everywhere

Aware of Armand Vaillancourt's commitment to independence and freedom for oppressed peoples, the Basque people invited him in 1983 to contribute a bronze sculpture to their homeland to replace Picasso's famous Guernica that commemorated the bombing of the Basque city in 1937 by General Franco that was no longer there. Vaillancourt did so, and was, in his own words, "treated like a king", chauffeur driven and well looked after, when he visited. Basque representatives in Montreal later presented him with a Basque flag in a special ceremony at his home on Esplanade St. in Montreal.

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* (1980) 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 (the old pulp mill) 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.<sup>86</sup>

Concrete poetry likewise finds its parallels in Vaillancourt's sculpture. Václav Havel, Diter 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, *deco 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.

The *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 whereby wet pulp is wrapped around trees to eventually become sculpture. 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. 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.

Vaillancourt has enacted hundreds of performances over his career. They can last a minute, one hour, one day or longer. One of his first public performances was in the mid-1950s when he paraded through the Montreal business district wearing a sandwich board clock on which were painted the words "Don't Lose Your Time". In 1984, during the *Carnival de Soleil* on St-Denis Street in Montreal, Vaillancourt enacted a performance in collaboration with Joane Beaulieu that lasted three full days. At St-Jean Port-Joli in 1983, a performance lasted 12 days. At Montmorency Falls in the autumn of 1979, Vaillancourt collected materials for a period of one month, seven days a week

amid the ice and cold. The whole piece was later carried downstream as the river rose ever higher. Even early sculpture happenings such as The me of Durocher Street, and the early live castings in front of public audiences, overlap into the realm of performance in Vaillancourt's art. He refuses to define public events he participates in exclusively as either sculpture, performance, or happening.

Less well known Vaillancourt works from the mid-80s are the Neon series exhibited in a show at Foufounes Electriques on Ste. Catherine St. East in Montreal, most of which were destroyed. These brightly coloured illuminated works used neon tubing in innovative ways to make statements about contemporary life.

Invited to attend a sculpture symposium sponsored by the Ministry of Tourism organized to boost publicity about Santo Domingo and to mark the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in the Dominican Republic in 1985. Vaillancourt raised the money to get there and used the event to manifest his social concern not only for the extinct Taino tribe of the region, but also for the oppressed Latin American peoples of this region who live in barrios. Comprising a massive sculpture fountain whose central block of composite sculpted stones measures 7,32 metres in length, 3.26 metres in height and 1,83 metres in width, El Clamor has 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 has called El Clamor: "A symbol of the vital energy of all these oppressed people (...) real freedom, that which is inside, that which can not be contained!"

With the participation of local workers, who provided

much of the physical labour, *El Clamor*, which Vaillancourt claims has cost \$80,000 to date, brought back memories of the hard work he had undertaken as a youth on the family farm.<sup>87</sup> The fountain section of the piece still requires an estimated \$20,000 of further funding and remains incomplete.

*Drapeau blanc* (1987), Vaillancourt's incongruous collection of white boulders imported from Quebec's independent heartland, involved collecting 92 tons of calcite from the Saguenay-Lac St. Jean region which were then transported to Laval University in Ste. Foy, Quebec. After they were brought there, the rocks were painted white, and quotes from such renowned Quebecers as poet Gaston Miron, songwriters Gilles Vigneault and Felix Leclerc were sand blasted in relief on the rocks. Quebec writer Simonne Monet-Chartrand's words are likewise emblazoned on one of the rocks that go to make up the ensemble; "I do not want the snow, the years and the cold to freeze my memory." Others include the writing of an anonymous Hindu poet and a quote from Martin Luther King that reads; "We have to learn to live together like brothers, otherwise we'll die together like idiots."

Yet again Vaillancourt's primal vision that art is a force for transforming society is symbolized by the hands of adults and children painted all over the white rocks. The transportation, relocation and eventual transformation of natural materials into artworks is again intensely physical. *Drapeau blanc!* demands a kind of labour more readily associated with labour in primary resource industries such as farm or forest work than art.

Vaillancourt considers trees to be an integral presence (not a product resource) rather than as objects when he works with them in his sculpture. Art critic Guy Viau reaffirmed this point when he wrote; "Vaillancourt respects primary materials. He seeks to rediscover an elementary sense of things (...) He has

fine reactions, carries himself like a primitive."<sup>88</sup> For Vaillancourt natural materials are something the artist must add to or work through. They have a spiritual dimension, an interiority.

In 1988, Vaillancourt was invited by the Pathfinder Press to contribute a portrait to a vast social realist mural (in the tradition of Orozco and Diego Rivera) measuring some 70 feet high by 85 feet long and situated on The Pathfinder Building in Greenwich Village not far from the Hudson River. The personage Vaillancourt chose to paint on this collective homage to freedom fighters and civil rights leaders from all over the world was Louis Riel, the Manitoba Metis leader who was hung by the Government of Canada. Other portraits contributed to the mural by artists from South Africa, Ireland, Argentina, Columbia, Mexico and the United States included Thomas Sankara, Mother Jones, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, Emiliano Zapata, Carlos Fonseca and Malcolm X. When asked why he had decided to paint Riel, Vaillancourt stated: "Louis Riel like Norman Bethune, defended the oppressed, the exploited and, above all, he did not let anyone walk over him."<sup>89</sup> The mural has since been painted over, but the image of the mural continues to be circulated worldwide by Pathfinder Press as a poster and in a special commemorative publication.

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 Liberte*. 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."<sup>90</sup> As

part of the event bystanders and members of the public were invited to paint sections of the text.

A critic commenting on Paix, Justice et Liberte called it "a work charged with social and political significance that clearly demonstrates that a work of art can have an objective function."<sup>91</sup> Seen in this busy downtown shopping area of Montreal, Paix, Justice et Liberte attracted significant attention from the public. Included among its other elements a structure with two 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.

## **Hommage aux Amerindiens**

With *Hommage aux Amerindiens* (1991-92), an eclectic assemblage of thirteen tepee-like structures made out of recycled wood painted in bright colours, we yet again see this concern for human rights, in this case, the Amerindian minority is the subject of yet another Vaillancourt's sculptures. Vaillancourt earlier 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.

Varying from twelve to eighteen feet in height, the thirteen, pieces that make up *Hommage aux Amerindiens* were exhibited in front of the Standard Life Building on Sherbrooke St. in Montreal and the Jardin Saint-Sauveur. 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. The standardized look of this work is structural, and radically different from Vaillancourt's *bois brulé* sculptures, whose forms were recuperated from nature in their natural state to then be worked on.

*Hommage aux Amerindiens* 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, a gesture of solidarity with the native peoples. 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.

Exhibited at other sites in Quebec, *Hommage aux Amerindiens* eventually went into storage in an old factory building in the south centre of Montreal, after Vaillancourt made an agreement with the building's owner, in November 1993, the avant-gardist theatre group Carbon 14 bought the building where Vaillancourt's piece was housed, it was cut by workers into 200 pieces with a jigsaw and effectively destroyed, despite the fact Carbon 14 had earlier given their permission for the works to be stored there, without the artist being notified in advance. By chance somebody had called Vaillancourt to tell him they were throwing the piece out.

The destruction of *Hommage aux Amerindiens* raised questions about how avant-gardists perceive each other, particularly from different artistic milieus; theatre and sculpture. This action had the appearance of an act of violence. The issue was taken to court, in a final ruling, Superior Court judge Pierrette Rayle decided that, though Vaillancourt put a value of \$725,000 on the work, a recompense of \$125,000 be awarded in Vaillancourt's favour. Though Carbon 14 considered appealing the decision they finally declined. The legal judgement was a moral victory for avant-garde art in Quebec, noted for its archaic attitudes to contemporary art and its value in the marketplace. It recalls the judgement rendered in Serge Lemoyne's court case, where his house in Acton Vale was allowed to remain decorated inside and outside as an artwork, despite complaints from other residents of Acton Vale.

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.

## **Song of the Nations**

The progression in Vaillancourt's career is from free public sculpture (The Tree of Durocher St.), to public commissioned monuments (Monument aux Morts, Quebec Libre, Je me souviens), to non-funded political monuments such as El Clamor, Drapeau blanc, Paix, Justice et Liberte and Hommage aux Amerindiens. 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 inferiority 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 inferiority 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 crossroad. 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.<sup>92</sup>

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.<sup>93</sup>

*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 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 his materials in a context of nature that he considers to be its original state of being. He then reconfigures them in a spontaneous process that links the sculpture 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. 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 Song of the Nations allude to Vaillancourt's 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 can be considered an assault on the hermetic, binary logic of the computer age.

Trees have their own 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 brule 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 Amerindiens. 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 inferiority.

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.

Commenting on Charlottetown Confederation Centre Director Terry Graff's offer to make a commissioned installation centred around his political viewpoints on Canada and confederation for a public gallery in Charlottetown, Vaillancourt was at first incredulous and "thought we was being set up". Graff found himself in hot water with some local Charlottetown federalists over the decision. G.R MacDonald in a letter to the Charlottetown Guardian stated, "I wonder who is responsible for this charade ... (Although) I accept that

this individual has the right to express his opinions, should they be invited and financed to the detriment of Canadian unity ?"94 Helen Smith wrote: "While Canada Council's generosity and absolute impartiality may appear commendable to some Canadians yet others may question its sagacity in allowing Mr. Vaillancourt to have a free forum for his politics as well as his art. What would Sir John A. and the Hon. Sir George Etienne Cartier say, were they able to revisit the Cradle of Confederation this summer?" In a lighter vein Allan French considered the commission "a shining example of tolerance."

Terry Graff defended his decision despite the local controversy stating, "Most of the people who objected to the Vaillancourt haven't even seen it. When they do see it, they find it fascinating, it is stimulating discussion and interest."95 Yet Vaillancourt's Song of the Nations was not conceived for a Quebec audience this time. Instead, it challenged Canadian social and cultural stereotypes. Without the fleur-de-lys, would this ultimately lyrical, joyous, theatrical sculpture, musical in its orchestration, be judged as a threat? Probably 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 Quebecois 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. This forest of coloured trees that descend from the ceiling of the Confederation Centre Art Gallery would be perceived as a beautiful abstract sculpture, which it is anyways, if it had no symbols. By including the symbols, Vaillancourt has

provided a comment not only on his own values but on the way people bring their own perceptions and stereotypes to acculturated symbols, in art or indeed anywhere. Another show held simultaneously at the Confederation Centre titled *The Canadian Beaver - Fact or Fiction?* played on and with similar postModern ironies.

Considering Canadian nationalism from a Quebec nationalist perspective may be one thing. But comparing the Canadian nationalist viewpoints of two English Canadian artists, Greg Curnoe and John Boyle, who espoused regional culture in the face of consumer capitalism with Vaillancourt's views, one finds some astonishing similarities. Talking about American imperialism in San Francisco in 1971, Vaillancourt states:

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."<sup>96</sup>

In looking at London, Ontario-based Canadian artist Greg Curnoe's artworks such as *True North Strong and Free* (1968) which includes the words "Close the 49th Parallel" or his fictional maps of North America with Mexico and Canada sharing a common border, with the United States left out, we find Curnoe attacked the presence of American imperial culture in Canada, in the same Armand Vaillancourt's pronouncement applies to Quebec. Curnoe's view of nationalism defined "being Canadian" as in a kind of diachronic opposition to another force - American culture. John Boyle's even more fervent anti-imperialism, by way of contrast with Armand Vaillancourt's, resulted in largely emotional and patriotic polemic and anti-American sloganeering. Pierre Theberge provides some lucid insights in Boyle's cultural nationalism when he writes:

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.  
97

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.<sup>98</sup> Boyle's incapacity to recognize the pluralistic nature of Canadian society and culture were a distinct blind spot in his proclamation.

With the benefit of hindsight we can see that while English-Canadian nationalists of this era viewed America as the enemy, Quebecois 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*, media theorist Marshall McLuhan states:

The Foil 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.<sup>99</sup>

## **After word(s)**

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."<sup>100</sup> 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 plausible to view the artistic image as a control situation for the corporate anaesthesia engendered by new technology."<sup>101</sup>

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 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.<sup>102</sup>

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.<sup>103</sup>

This attitude not only embodies principles of democracy, but 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 art making.

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 Vaillancourt works with ephemeral materials in private, creates temporary installations in Montreal for such venues as the inspecteur Epingle and Fougères Électriques, when it comes to public monuments, his view of the role and function of sculpture can be uncritical.

In public works Vaillancourt's 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."<sup>104</sup>

As the Gerz's 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 foot, 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 Quebec Libre project had in the past.

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 Musee 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. During the awards ceremony for his acceptance of the Prix Paul-Emile Borduas, Quebec's most prestigious arts award, on November 28, 1993, Vaillancourt shocked the audience and Quebec's Minister of Culture Liza Frulla who had just awarded him the prize with an acceptance speech where he held back nothing. The speech titled *On ne peut pas éteindre les volcans* was broadcast live on Radio Quebec. Parts of the speech were published in various Quebec reviews and magazines. Touchingly, he dedicated his acceptance of the prize to what he considered the exceptional courage of his childhood teacher Marguerite Proulx, who was put in charge of seven classes in one room, with a wood stove, a bedroom and a woodshed. 105 In the speech he railed against the state of Quebec and North American culture, state treatment of artists and the war in Bosnia. 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 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?<sup>106</sup>

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."<sup>107</sup>

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, 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).  
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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 viewpoints are singular and pluralistic at one and the same time. Vaillancourt's artistic values are ironically and synonymously traditional and avant-gardist. They seek an integral unity, in his approach to materials and techniques, Vaillancourt reflects a duplicity of approaches. On the one hand, when working with organic materials, as in his *bois brules*, *The Tree of Durocher St.* and *Song of the Notions*, he follows what Peter Burger in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* calls a "classicist" approach to artmaking. Material is treated as something living. As Burger states: "its significance (is) something that has grown from concrete life situations."<sup>109</sup> When working with non-organic materials like cast metal, steel and concrete, Vaillancourt follows the avant-gardist approach perceives material is just material. For Burger the avant-gardist is seen this way:  
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."110

In referring to what he calls the classicist's approach to materials. Burger 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."111

Armand Vaillancourt is a social sculptor whose 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 soundbox 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 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.

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## 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 much like the way he sees the use of materials. He has always perceived of material 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 *Quebec 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. Predominantly abstract, these works of art are less about politics than expression. *Hommage aux Amerindiens*, intended as a political statement is both structural and spiritual or interior, in that it uses recuperated pre-cut 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 reveal a greater concern with the inherent properties of materials, a search for inferiority 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, Vaillancourt's 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. With *Song of the Nations*, we see a return to inferiority 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. This time 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.

Armand Vaillancourt's social statements, his role in the development of modernist sculpture in Quebec, and monumental public sculpture is exemplary and particular. The secret behind Vaillancourt's art, I believe, ultimately comes from his love of life, from the people he has known over the years and above all - from nature. I hope that I have helped to redress much of the misunderstanding surrounding his life's work not only as a social activist and sculptor, but also as an extremely talented and unique person.

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