

Dossier | Strange Attractors

S esse.ca/en/strange-attractors

François Quévillon, Les attracteurs étranges, CDEx, Montréal, 2008.
Photo: courtesy of the artist



Strange Attractors

By Claire Savoie

“What is characteristic of Alice’s dream and of all oneiric visions is discontinuity, the suddenness of apparitions without transition, and of unstaged presences; it is the universal fluidity that surrounds and overtakes her, of which she is a part and that almost dissolves her.” (1)

Presented in the group exhibition Amplified Intimacies (2) at Oboro, François Quévillon’s installation Les attracteurs étranges is based on complex notions—among others, unstable balance—through an open system that links flows of matter, energy and information. Active within this system, antinomical principles examine, in the context of a privileged aesthetic experience, the perceptive conscience in its most sensitive recesses.

In a separate room built especially to contain it, the installation occupies part of the lobby. Within one of its walls a large, luminous screen (a glass basin) has been inserted, acting as the nerve centre of the work whose two faces we can see depending on which side of the room we stand. Since we must leave one observation point to reach the other, this twofold aspect (front/back) of the work operates as a kind of mirror in a space-time equation that is always a little out of synch. The visitor's relation to the work is imbued with fascination. Admittedly, the proposition invites an ambulatory reading (moving from one side of the screen and one face of the installation to the other) that is visual as well as aural, but above all it induces a perceptual vigilance that far exceeds more conventional enunciative spaces.

Anchored in the present moment of the work, this fascination comes with an expectation that is fully directed to what there is "to see." The acting phenomena—generated by a system far more complex than it appears—deploy with subtlety, and what animates their force is not readily visible since a fine mist moves in the light. (3) Its undulation (its moods) has a force of attraction that fixes the gaze, captive of its own roving. In a paradoxical way, the reading of the work also fulfils itself in a ceaseless movement of scrutiny. (4)

Here perceptual attention (or tension) is founded just as much on the waiting for an apparition (or a disappearance: what can I discern in that which is visible and in what conditions are my visual abilities maintained?) as on a more meditative, albeit less voluntary, state of receptivity. I would also like to qualify this state as picnoleptic, that is to say constituted by moments of absence (instantaneous disappearances) that for certain people seem to have the effect of suspending time. (5)

Judiciously conceived, the system of *Attracteurs étranges* is permeable in both directions and also takes into account what escapes from the piece. Therefore the clouds of smoke are organized in line with the installation's airtightness and its ramifications in space (the walls' extremities and joints, parts of an evacuation system guiding the smoke towards the gallery's skylights). A light fog infiltrates the room and dissipates in accordance with the visitors' presence. These furtive puffs of smoke present themselves as micro events that punctuate the breath of the work. Attached to the already effective elements found within the installation, they evoke the gaps in the thought process. That said, the work functions in accordance with a ceaseless circularity in which all its elements participate—in the concrete mechanics of the artwork as well as in the metaphorical constructions it calls to mind.

Quévillon's piece unfolds in the complexity of perception, the perception of an evasive reality in constant flux that is troubled by flights of fancy (projections and mental imagery). When visitors approach the screen, they find themselves drawn in as though overcome by vertigo. The effects of the smoke's movements, the degrees of optical depth that it causes, and the magnified sound textures all encourage this dizziness as well as our natural proclivity for mental projection.

The evanescent quality of the work makes us forget the nonetheless undeniably material implications that have made it possible (and which constantly renew its activity). Furthermore, the fact that the technological device of the installation and its hidden equipment are activated and calibrated based on the visitor's circulation certainly has a direct impact on the work; however, it does not seem to signify that we ought to concern ourselves with this, since the interactive principle is not deliberately emphasized. In a subliminal mode, the activation of the elements is highly nuanced, and the updated work's presence, which depends on the visitor's attendance, is bound to him or her, to their breath.

Until it can discern a perceptual object such as a sign and while it seeks to look at something, the eye fails in its exercise. The work's program seems to unveil itself based on an important condition: the other. Although this element of reading does not have the same import for everyone, it allows visitors to better grasp the concrete nature of the work, yet without destroying its magical effect. We could therefore suppose that the work relies on a certain otherness that only reveals itself to the gaze the better to evade it: the appearance of the face, the hand, and the body of the other visitor, the one on the other side. This brief instant of recognition brings to light the artwork's physical qualities as well as the procedures that generate them. Doubled by our own reflection on the glass wall—which is also subject to doubt—the image becomes confusing. Whom do I see, myself or the other? The smokescreen becomes not only a framework for our vision, but also the filter of communication. On the other hand, could it instead represent the advent of its impossibility? The gaze therefore fixes itself on instants that capture a reality taking place elsewhere, on the other side of the mirror (here Alice and Orpheus have certainly made it to the meeting).

In a kind of mirage, the faces (the other) that emerge in this way before our gaze seem to persist in our minds like ghosts or faintly elucidated presences. Afterglow, reminiscence: Does the hypnotic nature of the smokescreen produce this effect of oneiric distancing, or is this effect attributable to the overall climate of the piece? Does the turmoil result from what deploys itself at the limits of the visual register within this ethereal movement? Likewise, am I bound to this barely visible thing by a sort of vertigo triggered by grazing and a perception of depth? In bearing witness to the concrete mechanics of the work, the audio sustains this perceptual turmoil by further enveloping us in it. (6) Moreover, in magnifying the aural scope of the installation, the acoustic character of the space (which is resonant in and of itself) is also revealed. The above-mentioned distancing is thus emphasized. The audio component mixes with the visitor's effort to see, establishing a particular climate that subtly blends into the surrounding sounds.

From this economy of means—however complex and ingenious in their application—and from this sober and simplified aesthetics, a fertile *je-ne-sais-quoi* (7) manifests itself, which goes against the spectacular. This anti-spectacle effect helps to underscore the specifically event-driven nature of the artwork and to reveal its evocative powers. That said, could the

above-mentioned fascination find its measure in a phrase that brings us back to the inextricable part of the work, that which unsettles our sight? Used often lightly, this expression (*je-ne-sais-quoi*) comes to mind when a thing or a being exercises a charm upon us whose source we cannot identify with precision. Herein it defines the captivating quality of the work while evoking what keeps it out of our reach. In this sense, its “mystery” is the axis around which attraction moves.

The interface Quévillon creates, a system that is both transitional and transactional, produces metaphorical figures that we can easily associate with diverse ideas; notably, its precarious and evasive aspects can be linked to the notion of identity, whereas its modular surface can be modified by the gaze of the other. Likewise, this interface that operates from a microcosm whose parameters are unstable—and whose climate the -spectator regulates unwittingly—will give rise to perceptual opportunities. Kairos, would say Virilio, (8) and with the specificity of the Greek language, he would highlight what these opportunities present to the visitor: “. . . this possible entry into another logic that dissolves the concepts of truth and illusion, of reality and appearance. . . .” Each -apparition offers an incision into a continuum where what Merleau-Ponty called “the emptiness of the imaginary and the fullness of what is perceived” (9) is at stake, and where my perceptive faith is tricked without nevertheless being deluded since what I see is actually real, even in the moments where there is little to see. The window screen is not only the indivisible point between two aspects of the same reality, but also the extremely thin (skin-like) point of contact upon which my gaze rests in this appeal to discern what originates in my mind (an illusion) from what is real. However, this is only verifiable insofar as my timing coincides with that of what can be found on the other side of the window (ubiquitous point of view).

Finally, in this circumscribed visual space where dissimulation is the condition of appearance, the visible and the invisible overlap. Thus dissolved in the same “pool of vision” from where images of faces will sometimes emerge and disappear, identity and otherness will also be confused in a delayed temporality’s shifting of appearances. “The timid and fugitive gleam, the breakthrough moment, the silence, the evasive signs—it is in this form that the most important things in life choose to become known to us. It is neither easy to surprise the infinitively doubtful gleam, nor easy to understand its meaning. This gleam is the blinking light of unfocused sight in which what is unacknowledged can suddenly be recognized. More palpable than the last sigh of Melisande, the mysterious gleam resembles a light breath.” (10)

In short, all of this rests on almost nothing: some air, a puff of smoke...

[Translated from the French by Vivian Ralickas]

NOTES

1. Jean-Jacques Mayoux, Foreword, Lewis Carroll, *Tout Alice* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), 24. (Our translation)
2. In presenting works that integrate, among other things, tangible media-related

installations and on-site interactions, the exhibition by the group Interstices focused on new forms of proxemics that develop through the use of network communication services (curators: Lynn Hughes and Jean Dubois; 13 September to 18 October 2008).

3. Its movement is set in motion by air currents generated by ventilators concealed inside the glass basin, which are activated by visitors' presence and movements on both sides of the smoke screen.

4. I make reference to both meanings of this term: literally, to examine (something) with great care and, figuratively, to attempt to penetrate (something abstract) to discover what lies hidden.

5. Paul Virilio developed this notion in *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. Philip Beitchman (New York, N.Y.: Semiotext(e), 1991).

6. The vibrations of the ventilators' motors and the internal resonance of the mechanism are amplified and transmitted through a built-in surround system.

7. "What if je-ne-sais-quoi rightly consecrates the inexplicable?" Vladimir Jankélévitch has probed the multiple aspects of this expression in *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1980), 43. (Our translation)

8. Virilio (1991).

9. *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

10. Jankélévitch (1980).