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Societies under the Influence
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With the currently prevailing dynamics of the economy generating a slew of social and environmental problems, and geopolitics appearing to be as chaotic as the climate, the upheavals presently impacting our world and its future are definitely cause for concern. Such realities and their ramifications have become prime material for artists today. The collapse of the twin towers in 2001 has deeply shaken the relative security in which North Americans have lived since the Second World War. Beset since by new traumas—suicide attacks on mass transportation in large Western cities, retaliations of extremists causing the death of thousands of American and allied troops serving in the Middle East, secret services thwarting Machiavellian plans for the destruction of Western economies and democracies, rising multicultural tensions within their very own cities, channelled by religious fundamentalism, the resulting fear and xenophobia—, society is in the grips of insecurity and anticipates the worst. The twists and turns of this collective anxiety give the contemporary artist much to think about—as does the latent phobia that we find inscribed into our everyday lives and ready to flare up at the least spark.

Panic in Montreal, (1) an installation by Ontario artist Jenny Brown presented at the Société des arts technologiques (SAT) last fall, runs plainly in this vein. The work lampoons the fearful panic that's taken hold of society since the rise of terrorism, confronted with the unknown and the uncontrollable. Constructed from elements of horror movies, sensationalist news images, and recent photographs of the city, the video depicts the cataclysmic scenario of a frenzied crowd in Montreal, terrorized by a monstrous cloud of dust that's ravaging the city. Panic in Montreal is the second project in a series the artist is developing on our reactions to the events of 9/11 and to the mass media in general; the first, Attack on Ottawa, was produced in 2006. Brown intends to pursue this reflection in forthcoming productions, using American cities to set the action of her tragicomic, sociologically informed videos.

Underlying this work and its treatment of the dread that now haunts our everyday lives—terrorist strikes, wars, nuclear or biological weapons, fears of all kinds, real or fabricated—is Godzilla. The reference isn't fortuitous. First produced in 1954, the film staged a gigantic dinosaur, brought to life by fallout from nuclear tests over the ocean, who sets about ravaging Tokyo. According to a popular theory, the original film, despite being an entertainment vehicle, is the Japanese response to the trauma of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a critical pamphlet on the effects of the nuclear bomb. Having attained cult status—and been the subject over twenty-nine remakes since—, the film has been laden with political

significance, in some sense polarizing the hegemonic and coercive nature of dominant powers over the years, becoming a reflection, too, of the impact of armaments in the world. The topic could not be more current today, in a geopolitical context where the rush to go nuclear has picked up again, led by ideological fanaticism and a thirst for control and power. Like the many remakes of the film, Brown's work highlights the story's repetitive structure, a present that actualizes a history of war and nuclear threat.

A collage of humour and snapshots, her video montage faithfully renders the current zeitgeist while revealing the mechanisms that underly the mediatization of information and that influence our way of perceiving and assimilating it. Setting the tone from the outset, the tape begins with a musical theme, like the typical opening of a newscast. Apocalyptic scenes follow upon one another in a visual and sonic mixture that highlights the dramatization that often accompanies the presentation of tragic news. Effective in this respect is the insertion of animated sequences among the fixed shots, brought out by the framing and repeatedly showing the same scene—a collision between two cars, or of a helicopter crashing into a building, for example.

The installational arrangement skillfully places the visitor in context. Fairly recognizable pictures of the city help situate the action in the reality of Montreal, while a deft interactive device literally places the visitor within the tragedy taking place on the screen. In the SAT exhibition, the large-scale video was projected on the wall of a closed basement space. Entering the room to look at the work, the viewer soon noticed figures silhouetted on the screen—mobile, fleeting transparencies superimposed on the background video image. Instinctively, the viewer looks for the origin of the activity, even stepping back out of the room. A webcam fixed to the ceiling in the adjacent room records surrounding movement. A software program processes the captured images in real time, comparing them to the base image of the empty room. Isolating information not part of the initial image, the program projects the sequence onto the screen in the other room. This second video appears within the existing montage, outlining participants' negative image, stripped of all elements of their real and actual environment. (2) The interactors, who are in fact physically present in Montreal, find themselves involuntarily plunged into an apocalyptic and surreal landscape in which they appear to be ambling about in blithe indifference. Just as disconnected is the viewer's passive stance before the screen. Once they've understood the process, a 10-second delay preceding the insertion allows viewers to consciously play the part given them.

This mise-en-scène is a thoroughly relevant metaphor for our posture as spectators before the mediatized dissemination of tragedies occurring in the world. They translate a kind of ambivalence we feel—part compassion, part disaffection—when confronted with the tragic events experienced by proxy every day through screen images and text, threats simultaneously distant and immanent. Besides shedding light on our actions in such situations, the artist's avowed aim is to stir visitors to self-awareness with respect to the

tacit manipulation that certain media—television, radio, and even film—exert on audiences by favouring a misleading perspective on reality, conditioning our gaze, influencing our decisions. The excess and the bombardment of images and ideas are also part of reinforcing strategies that can engender either paranoia or indifference, two prevalent and worrisome states of mind in our current societies. Splicing and assembling various subjects to construct a completely fabricated reality, Brown decries the disinformation, inasmuch as this procedure, so common in the media, consists precisely in "editing" the news, doctoring the facts to serve opportunistic interests, and distorting the initial message. Through its journalistic and sensationalist treatment, playing on truth and fiction at once, the work also questions the impact and influence of such misleading media practices as infotainment and docudramas when purportedly meant to inform. Straddling and blurring the line between entertainment and reporting, these confusing perspectives can in fact have serious consequences if taken at face value.

The Yes Men's subversive work is a fine example. Also taking a critical look at mass media and information issues, the group has repeatedly exposed both the media's and the public's carelessness in validating information and the dangers that result from it. Their latest extravaganza goes back to June 14, 2007. Surfing on apprehensions prompted by the exhaustion of oil reserves and dire meteorological predictions, they concocted a devilishly heretic scenario whereby, as guest specialists at the North American conference for the Gas and Oil Exposition in Calgary, they explained straight-faced to attendees, "that climate changes were indeed a reality, whatever some heavyweights in the industry might say, and that, realistically, the industry should stop denying the evidence and show some imagination in dealing with the dwindling worldwide reserves. Thanks to research they conducted in Washington," said the alleged S.K. Wolff, "the industry should take an interest in the millions likely to die from extreme heat and droughts caused by global warming." (3) With numbers and slide presentations in tow, they proposed their discovery, Vivoleum, an oil-based petrolium substitute extracted from all the useless remains, thus becoming both profitable and recyclable. The two accomplices even circulated prototypes of candles made of oil, they said, extracted from a janitor who had worked at Exxon and died of cancer, having donated his body for the betterment of the industry he had worked for during his life. Having duped an audience of more than 300 industry representatives for several minutes, the latter only reacted when shown a video of the late employee's recorded testament about his wish to be transformed into a candle. The truculent hoax was covered by major papers the world over, highlighting the potential flights of speculation and the credulousness, here, of the decision-makers in an industry on which our lives depend so greatly. Infiltrating the news media to spread such false and fantastic information, though always constructed from current events, these associates have mystified the international press and the public several times over. (4)

As hilarious as they are, the Yes Men's interventions and the reactions they elicit prompt reflection on the role and impact of the media on the transmission of ideas and information. As exceptional vectors of communication, such transmitter-receivers are as apt to enlighten as to obscure our way. Information, manipulation, and come-ons easily go hand in hand. In this respect, the editorial stance of certain media, directed by the ideologies and political allegiances of their owners or by the weight of influence, has a tendentious effect on the ideas transmitted. It's all the more the case in this era of convergence, where statements echo one another, validating each other to give credibility to a system of thought. Control of public opinion is certainly a formidable weapon, but the power audiences accord to the purveyors of information is still more pernicious. In the Western context of content overload, of presumed freedom of choice, opinion and expression, individuals may have control of the messages they receive, to the extent that, on the face of it, they have the latitude and the resources for distilling and sorting received ideas. The lure of uniformity being the wellspring of fundamentalism, whether social, political, or religious, it is imperative that citizens draw from several sources of information, for the sake of freedom of thought and action. It is all the more crucial today, when the borders between business and communications are largely open to the world, establishing an interactive dynamics where the actions of each impact the other. Moreover, the thoroughly real extremism that weighs upon us also has ramifications in the excesses of both outrageousness and indifference—attitudes that can be fostered by the media through ideological indoctrination and image bombardment, and that can potentially lead to intolerance, segregation, and de-sensitization.

Baudrillard, theorist of the contemporary era, criticized the media and their underhanded effects on society, stating that they confined us to an artificial perception of the world. In his Simulacres et simulation, he supports his argument by citing, among others, the famous dictum of Canadian sociologist Marshall McLuhan, "the medium is the message," (5) a concept that says much about the power of the media over the content they convey. At a time when information is propagated into every nook and cranny of our private and public lives through the combined actions of electronic, audiovisual, and print media, there is cause to be concerned about the consequences of the influence of the media and the manipulation of ideas. The work of Jenny Brown and the Yes Men brings this issue to light. Founding their work on the treatment of real issues of great concern which they inscribe with codes and tactics characteristic of the media and communications, the one through parody, the other by way of hoax, they show the impact of media propaganda on the collective imagination and of disinformation on social orientations. They illustrate how the two practices fuel and exacerbate the sense of fear that afflicts contemporary Westerners, a sense of fear which, potentially taking the form of distrust, intransigence, or even hate and violence, participates in the vicious cycle of world conflict. Baudrillard also said that one "must live intelligently with the system while rebelling against its consequences. One must live with the notion that we have survived the worst."6 Apparently in line with this ideological perspective, these artists denounce current government powers while broaching

individual and collective responsibility with respect to the impact citizens can have and the power of working together on major social issues. In so doing, they engage the spectators' capacity for critical thought and reflection, soliciting their positive contributions to change, summoning them as agents in working toward a better future.

[Translated from the French by Ron Ross]

NOTES
1. The installation Panic in Montreal was presented as part of "L'Œuvre ouverte" | Congrès PureData 07, an event held August 21 to 26, 2007, at the Société des arts technologiques (SAT). PureData is a graphical programming language designed for real-time digital music and multimedia creation that is freely available on the Web. For more information on the event and on open source free software, see www.pure-data.ca.
2. The program functions somewhat like the blue screen in movie-making, where actors play their part sans decor, and are then added to the montage; the program cuts out all the blue areas from the initial shot, keeping only the protagonists' images, which can now be matched with the desired setting.
3. From the article by Louis-Gilles Francœur, "Le vivoleum pour remplacer le petroleum," in Le Devoir, Tuesday, June 19, 2007.
4. For more information about the Vivoleum performance and the many hoaxes perpetrated by the group, see www.theyesmen.org. Also see Stephen Wright's article, "L'irrévérence tactique," esse, no. 56 (winter 2006): 12-15.
5. Jean Baudrillard, Simulacres et simulation (Paris: Galilée [Débats], 1981), 123.
6. Id., Cool Memories 4 – 1955-2000 (Paris: Galilée [Incises], 2000), 10.