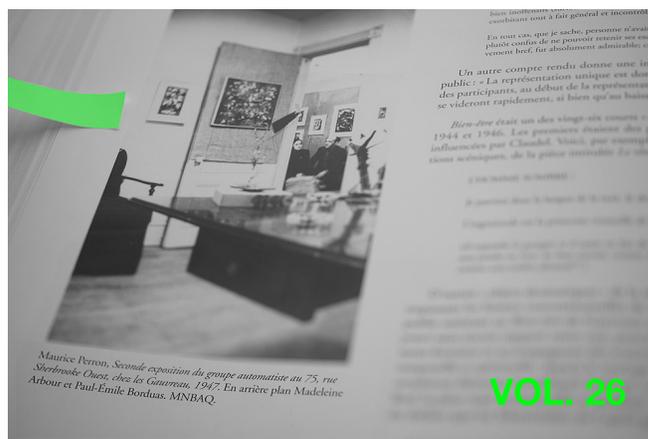# "Créer à rebours vers l'exposition": The case of the second Automatist exhibition

A curatorial and art intervention
by Klaus Scherübel

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Klaus Scherübel, *Sans titre (VOL. 26)*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

In adopting a variety of roles throughout his career—artist at work, editor, sponsor, producer of a sitcom and of a play—Klaus Scherübel examines in his art practice the context and wider history of culture. For this exhibition, VOX has entrusted him with the role of "conservator," tasked with reactivating an event that is at once mythical and foundational to modern Quebec: the second Automatist exhibition of 1947. This "artistic reactivation" is the sixth iteration of "*Créer à rebours vers l'exposition*," the Centre's research project on the history of exhibitions in Québec, begun in 2016.[1]

For more than seventy years, the second Automatist exhibition has been widely studied in monographs and anthologies, to the point that it is today thought of as a legendary historical event. In the same way exhibition catalogues do, those volumes shape our perception of works and orient our appreciation of the context in which they appeared, whether through the substance of their critical commentaries or the quality of their visual documentation. Before the 1980s, exhibition catalogues tended to consist simply of reproductions of works, only seldom showing the context in which those works had been presented.[2] And yet, in publications that mention the second Automatist exhibition, a photographic reproduction often accompanies the textual commentary. It shows the works, with Paul-Émile Borduas and Madeleine Arbour visible in the background, framed in a doorway.[3] Over time, the photograph has gradually superimposed itself on people's idea of the exhibition, eventually becoming its consummate visual reference. Seeking to "work back" through time and reactualize the past starting from the present, Klaus Scherübel has used this image as a conceptual tool: he has reconstituted, three-dimensionally, the black & white photo taken by Maurice Perron in a context that has since become historic.[4] Through that diversional operation, the image, which had originally been reproduced in "book space," infiltrates the gallery space and, through that spillover effect, acquires the form of an exhibition.

The second Automatist exhibition took place in the home of Julienne Saint-Mars-Gauvreau, the mother of Claude and Pierre Gauvreau, at 75 Sherbrooke Street West, Apartment 5, from February 15 to March 1, 1947.[5] It was the second event to feature this group of Québécois artists interested in surrealist and psychoanalytical issues, and marked the first occasion on which a commentator styled them as "Automatists"[6] taken together, the dozens of photocollages and other painterly, sculptural and graphical works in the exhibition constituted one of the first collective manifestations of an artistic modernity at odds with the dominant (essentially Christian) values of Quebec society. The photographs taken by Maurice Perron at the time—the only extant images of the event—show that parts of the walls of several rooms in the Sherbrooke Street apartment had been temporarily covered in burlap to heighten the neutrality of the domestic interior, except for one room that had white walls.[7] The paintings were

displayed in diverse modes—aligned individually or in a grid, hung on doors and even a radiator, perched on easels, densely hung in the main room—while the sculptures were arranged on a desk. At the time, young artists fairly often showed their works in similar settings—apartments, bookstores, studios—outside the circuit of commercial galleries and other institutions, which generally showed little interest in their experimental pursuits.[8] And yet, in hindsight, the second Automatist exhibition epitomizes the advent of modernist Quebec: simultaneously breaking with the *Grande Noirceur* and heralding the Quiet Revolution.[9]

How to go about reactivating an exhibition for which no trace remains of most of the works presented, and that survives in collective memory only through published photographs and commentaries?[10] Klaus Scherübel has answered that question not by constituting new archives to take account of it, nor by reassembling the works shown, but by rematerializing the partial view of this exhibition held in the private confines of an old apartment. To that end, he has employed a representational mode borrowed from "analog" museography: the period room. This practice, as Raymond Montpetit has written, "installs an image of reality, a *scène de vie* that refers, through resemblance, to a real situation, which visitors recognize as being the source of the presentation."[11] It aims to reconstitute the characteristic interiors of a given period, like a series of freeze frames.[12] Constitution of a period room relies on an arrangement of architectural components, furniture and objects, an assemblage that seeks to reproduce the particular "style" of an interior, often a living space, as it appeared at some point in the past. It typically incites a particular experience of space and time in the viewer and, in so doing, contributes to production of new knowledge, partly by setting art objects or works in a décor and atmosphere that offer a new perspective on the history and narratives that have stemmed from objects or works. The space is built based on historical documents—inventories, archives, first-person accounts, literary texts, architectural plans, painterly works—and, where possible, photographs. Except, as Marie-Ève Marchand reminds us, "history as formulated in, and from, those various sources is already a representation; that is, a translation of what was lived, a composition subjected to the point of view [. . .] of the person who is recounting, interpreting the past and, in so doing, constructing a [hi]story."[13] And in this case, it is based precisely on a "composition" expressing a personal point of view—a photograph by Maurice Perron—that Scherübel has produced in his reconstitution. As an artistic photographer, a signatory to and the publisher of *Refus global*, Perron was a privileged witness to the Automatists' exhibitions and performances; his are the only known photographs of them. Consequently, his images have undeniably contributed to the course of research into this Quebec movement, having been so often displayed and reproduced in various publications. While Perron typically made exhibition and vernissage views that employed subjective composition, he also occasionally made use of staging and lighting to instil, for example, a more expressionist, even surrealist mood.[14]

The task of painstakingly replicating, to scale, an exhibition that took place in the ordinary setting of a family apartment has prompted Scherübel to cast a critical eye on the practices relative to period rooms. First, it must be pointed out that the creation of period rooms, as found in museums, often falls within a political, elitist endeavour aiming to represent the contexts or lifestyles of the dominant social classes, which are often sources of funding for those very institutions.[15] Scherübel's reconstitution instead shows us a view of a living space bereft of luxury: the Gauvreaus were a family of free thinkers, engaged with the cultural and literary milieu, but they came from a modest background.[16] Second, in disengaging from any attitude of "connoisseurship"—that is, knowledge constituted around the provenance and originality of the objects, furniture and coverings in the room—Scherübel has abstained from the conventions of authenticity and historicism that ordinarily inform the design of a period room.[17] For this replication of the second Automatist exhibition does not reproduce the attributes of the apartment in 1947 so much as those of its photographic documentation: the fragmentary view, tight framing, black & white, cast shadow, subjective vision, and intimate setting, among other things.

This sort of enterprise, moreover, is nothing new: many historical reconstitutions have used exhibition views as reproducible data. In 1986, a certain Kazimir Malevich (Belgrade) endeavoured to faithfully reproduce, in an apartment in that city, the *Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting 0.10* (1915) using the only subsisting photograph of it.[18] Elitza Dulguerova also evokes the practice in her discussions of exhibitions devoted to the Russian avant-gardists that make use of similar historical reconstitutions, also created from photographs.[19] Scherübel's undertaking nonetheless diverges from those approaches: by partially replicating the Automatist exhibition, in black & white, it locates us explicitly in the space of its photographic representation. Moreover, the artist has placed his reproduction behind glass, thus producing a deliberate distancing that contributes to the visitor's seeing the replicated scene as a film "set". About this referencing of a process that is fairly commonly used for period rooms, Marchand writes: "the glass wall, despite seeming to afford maximum visibility—a visibility whose artificiality is, moreover, betrayed by the reflections it produces—is in fact the most hermetic of barriers thrown up between the period room and the visitor."[20] Indeed, the illusion produced by the reactivation of a past moment is here coupled with the explicitly concrete experience of the museographical device. Standing between the visitor and the reconstituted exhibition view, the glass situates us in the present of a remembered past.[21] As well, the borders are all the more blurred by the fact that text—including a title, the author's name, and a volume number—has been inscribed on the glass itself, which again implies a spillover: this time, we (re)enter "book space."

Thus we might assert that Scherübel's installation fits within the categories of the present: it is a space of memory that, via its conceptual *modi operandi*, tends to tell us something about our present. It affords us the unsettling experience of a place belonging to a past that is gone, marked by a (hi)story in which one of the crucial scenes of modernist Quebec was played out, but the story of which, in its continuous becoming, is and always will be developing.[22] This operation is precisely what enables the past to be revealed from the vantage point of a future made present by reason of the artistic and conceptual experience that we make of it. This type of reconstitution likely has affinities with "presentism", a regime of historicity defined by François Hartog, because in addition to activating past events while seeking to actuate new narratives in anticipation of the future, it reveals to us a particular facet of our present: the desire to historicize it. The practice of "returns to," Hartog explains, no longer rests on the transmission of past stories, but on a reconstruction that guarantees their reappropriation and their reactivation. How? Through a process of reflection: "by making the past's selective recycling, or the passage from the past into the present (which is how memory works) into the starting point of its historiographical operations."[23] In that sense, the period room device favoured by Klaus Scherübel, via its mode of presentification of history and via its surreal presence, helps generate an operational experience of historicity, by conjugating complex timescales.

Marie J. Jean

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1. This series of exhibitions has been conceived by Claudine Roger and myself.

2. As Remi Parcollet reminds us, exhibition views first appeared around 1850 and "are distinct from photographic reproductions of artworks, with the particularity of being dated and, more important, situated." Remi Parcollet (dir.), "La photographie de vues d'exposition," *Photogénie de l'exposition*, Paris: Manuella Éditions, 2018, p. 13. [Freely translated.]

3. This view was first reproduced in the *Refus global* manifesto in 1948. Another often-reproduced photograph shows the Automatist group in front of Borduas' *Sous le vent de l'île* (1947). There are ten views of the second Automatist exhibition in the Fonds Maurice Perron at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.

4. This project extends the thinking around exhibition catalogues initiated by Scherübel when he developed the exhibition *Tractatus Logico-Catalogicus* for VOX in 2008. It brought together pieces by artists who, from 1954 to the present, have made the catalogue the principal object or subject of their works. See http://www.centrevox.ca/en/exposition/tractatus-logico-catalogicus/.

5. The exhibition included works by Marcel Barbeau, Paul-Émile Borduas, Roger Fauteux, Pierre Gauvreau, Fernand Leduc, and Jean-Paul Mousseau.

6. The journalist and art critic Tancrède Marsil, Jr., entitled his account of the group's second exhibition "Les Automatistes. L'école Borduas"; this was the source of the name later ascribed to them. The first Automatist exhibition had been held at 1257 Amherst St. from April 20 to 29, 1946 (as reported in *Le Quartier latin*, the Université de Montréal student newspaper, February 28, 1947, p. 4). Though they adhered to several ideas that had been developed by André Breton, notably taking an interest in "automatic writing" processes, the group and its approach mostly eschewed the dream-scape depictions of the Surrealists and had more affinities with the intuitive approach of the American Abstract Expressionists. In fact, in renewing the language of abstraction, the Québec Automatists' research and experimentations prefigured, in various respects, those of many U.S. artists, despite the absence of communication between them and the artists in the orbit of the *Refus global*.

7. François-Marc Gagnon, *Chronique du mouvement automatiste québécois. 1941-1954,* Montréal: Lanctôt Éditeur, 1998, p. 307.

8. Case in point: at the time of the second Automatist exhibition, the Art Association of Montreal (the precursor to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts) was showing the exhibition *The Arts of French Canada, 1613–1870*. Except for Paul-Émile Borduas, the group's mentor, the Automatists had yet to show their works widely, although the annual exhibition of the Contemporary Arts Society had included a few. See François-Marc Gagnon, *Paul-Émile Borduas*, exhibition catalogue, Montreal: Montréal Museum of Fine Arts, 1988.

9. In *Refus global* Borduas described Québec society of the time as "[a] little people, huddled to the skirts of a priesthood viewed as sole trustee of faith, knowledge, truth and national wealth, shielded from the broader evolution of thought as too risky and dangerous and educated misguidedly, if without ill intent, in distortions of the facts of history, when complete ignorance was impracticable." Paul-Émile Borduas, "Refus global," in *Paul-Émile Borduas, Écrits/Writings 1942–1958*, trans. and eds. François-Marc Gagnon and Dennis Young, Halifax: 1978, p. 45.

10. To date, only one of the works seen in this exhibition view has been identified with certainty: an oil painting on canvas by Borduas entitled, variously, *Sans titre, Abstraction and Construction barbare* (1947). It is thought that the work seen on the door is also an oil on canvas work by Borduas (though no trace of it now remains), that the ink works in the background were by Gauvreau, and that the sculptures on the desk in the foreground were by Mousseau.

11. Raymond Montpetit, "Une logique d'exposition populaire : les images de la muséographie analogique," in *Publics et Musées*, No. 9, 1996, pp. 55–103. [Freely translated.]

12. In the 1920s, Alexander Dorner conceptualized this relationship linking space and image in the exhibition context, in the process coining the term *Raumbild*. Translated literally as "spatialized image" or "image of space," the idea refers to the unsettled frontiers between space, time and the image, between perception and knowledge, between material and immaterial. Dorner also used the expression *Atmosphärenräume* ("atmosphere room") to describe his museographical approach, which sought to create an immersive experience using furnishings that referred to the style of a given period. See Sandra Karina Löschke, "Material aesthetics and agency: Alexander Dorner and the stage-managed museum," in *Interstices. Journal of Architecture and Related Arts*, No. 14, 2012. Online at: http://interstices.aut.ac.nz/ijara/index.php/ijara/article/view/110.

13. Marchand continues: "As a mediation of mediations, a setting into history of settings into history, a representation of representations, the period room cannot be more than a simulacrum. [. . .] There is no direct access to the past; only an access that is materially mediated and therefore structurally altered, because although objects bear the traces of time, they are not time itself, and even less history. This is the context in which one must envision the epistemology of history constructed and represented using the device of the period room." Marie-Ève Marchand, "L'histoire de l'art mise en pièces. Analyse matérielle, spatiale et temporelle de la *period room* comme dispositif muséal," Ph.D. thesis in Art History, Montréal: Université de Montréal, 2014, pp. 116–17. [Freely translated.]

14. As, for example, when he photographed the 1947 exhibition of Mousseau's and Riopelle's works in Muriel Guilbault's apartment. These images are part of the Fonds Maurice Perron at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.

15. For example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City includes many period rooms recreating the *salons* and living rooms of France, England and Austria, fragments of townhouses reflecting the tastes of the haute bourgeoisie or aristocracy, and this exhibitional mode is featured in many museums to represent the affluent classes.

16. Julienne Saint-Mars-Gauvreau, Claude and Pierre Gauvreau's mother, hosted many exhibitions in her Sherbrooke Street apartment. A single mother, she had an interest in the arts and culture.

17. As Marie-Ève Marchand explains, "[t]he idea of authenticity mapped out based on the practices of connoisseurship entails a process of meticulous observation and of formulation of hypotheeses, the goal of which is to distinguish the original from its copy, and the effect of which is to construct the value of an object." *op. cit.*, p. 15. [Freely translated.]

18. In addition to the approximate facsimile, in colour, of the famous canvases shown in *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting 0.10*, the reconstitution recounted, in a so-called autobiographical manner, the life of the Russian artist via a compilation of various documents. See Marie J. Jean, "Art Histories: Artists' Temptations," Montréal, VOX, centre de l'image contemporaine, 2012. Online at: http://www.centrevox.ca/en/exposition/art-histories/.

19. Dulguerova distinguishes between two different attitudes: on the one hand, "use of such documentary views that favours a fetishizing of history" and, on the other, "ironic posturing and an insistence on the unfinished that invites interplay between photographic referent and three-dimensional reconstruction." See "L'expérience et son double. Notes sur la reconstruction d'expositions et la photographie," in *Intermédialités. Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques*, No. 15 (Spring 2010), p. 64. [Freely translated.] Scherübel's undertaking, meanwhile, advances a third attitude, by more specifically staging the documentation of the exhibition.

20. Marchand calls these types of period room "vignettes", "whose general form is reminiscent of a theatre stage, owing to the removal of one wall, generally referred to as the 'fourth'." *Op. cit.*, pp. 45-51. [Freely translated.]

21. It could just as well situate us in the future if, in this case, we perceive the forecasting effect of the text placed in front of the "image", in the manner of a poster announcing an upcoming event.

22. It is especially significant to note here that the exhibition views first appeared with the publication of *Refus global* in 1948, the first proof edition of which is held at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, and would not appear again until 1971, in the catalogue of the exhibition *Borduas et les automatistes. Montréal 1942-1955* under the direction of Henri Barras, who oversaw this first historical exhibition of the Automatists, presented at the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais in Paris (1971) and later at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (1972). Following that return, after an absence of 24 years, the views would be abundantly reproduced in monographs and anthologies dedicated to the Automatist movement and artists.

23. François Hartog, "Memory, History and the Present," in *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*, tr. Saskia Brown, New York: Columbia University Press, 2015, p. 145. Originally published as "Temps et histoire. 'Comment écrire l'histoire de France ?'," in *Annales. Histoire, Sciences sociales*, Vol. 50, No. 6, September October 1995, p. 1234.