



Images: Michèle Provost, Everything must go / Liquidation totale, exhibition view, Ottawa Art Gallery, 2018. Photo: André Rozon.

INTERNACIONAL

“EVERYTHING MUST GO/ LIQUIDATION TOTALE” AND ITS EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

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Scientific laws, although falsifiable, are usually considered immovable. In the art realm, however, while institutions will insist on the importance of professional recognition, either through critical consensus or academic training, art history has proved otherwise. Despite claims to a solid argumentative base, success and recognition seem more tied to a lottery-like process. Under these conditions, we might want to turn our attention to the framework in which artistic practice is being presented, taking into account the question already introduced by Nelson Goodman of: “when is art?”.¹

Although it is true that agents of the art world have the burden, or some might say the advantage, of reconciling the discourse with the referent in cases of interpretative gaps, this also points to the sometimes inaccurate correspondence between linguistic and artistic modes of expression.²

Case in point: the exhibition of Québec artist Michèle Provost at the Ottawa Art Gallery (OAG) entitled

“Everything must go/Liquidation totale”, perfectly exemplifies the autonomist thesis of art, and the institutional system’s tendency to dictate the meaning of the artwork – if sometimes involuntarily.

The heart of the issue resides in the long-debated question of appropriation art. Key appropriationists, such as Warhol, Levine, Lawler, Prince or Bidlo, were already confronted with the regulatory and categorizing complexities inherent to this type of artistic practice. An oft-debated example would be Warhol’s “Brillo Boxes”, as exemplified by a famous the Canadian incident in which then - director of the National Gallery of Canada, Charles Comfort, categorized the works as “non-sculptures” in customs documents.³

The question of characterization of appropriation art and the attribution of the authority to decide such matters inevitably lead to a standstill. Since the art world lacks in unifying criteria to adjudicate such matters, conflicting interests are bound to come into play, as they did in the



case of the exhibition shown at the OAG under the title “Everything must go/Liquidation totale”.

The original installation, as conceived by Gatineau artist Michèle Provost, relied on the work and career of Canadian icon Jean-Paul Riopelle, building a case study intended to reflect on the position of the artist in our society, and more precisely inside the art world.

Approved by the OAG and supported by the Canada Council for the Arts, the work invoked a series of economic, human and material considerations. Provost’s appropriation of Riopelle was initially embraced as a pertinent proposition to be shown in a public gallery. However, the modifications subsequently imposed profoundly altered the very essence of the installation.

Shortly before the opening of the show, an executive decision was made by the OAG to inform the Riopelle estate of the existence of the project. The case was swiftly transferred over to SODRAC (*Société du droit de reproduction des auteurs*

compositeurs et éditeurs au Canada), the organization responsible for the legislation of copyright in Québec, who formally rejected the idea of such an exhibition being carried out. Well aware of the Fair Dealing provisions of the Copyrights Act, SODRAC instead invoked issues of privacy protection and rights of personality. In doing so, they were not only overreaching the scope of their copyrights mandate, but also making assumptions, sight-unseen, about an installation which, in effect, focused solely on the professional and public life of the Canadian artist.⁴

By taking the matter out of the artist’s hands and contacting the Riopelle estate for mere informative and courtesy purposes, the OAG, had in effect dominated the course of action and irremediably altered the artistic statement. Predictably, the fear of a lawsuit became the primary determining factor, even though legal experts weighed in on the side of artistic merit in this case. Recognizing the problem, the OAG later organized a panel discussion entitled “Navigating Hierarchies:

Appropriation Art and the Law”, in which the matter was discussed with the artist, the curator and a lawyer specializing in copyright issues.

At that point, however, the damage had been done, and the artist had been forced to recompose an exhibition with the objects she had painstakingly been creating to serve an entirely different, and crucial purpose. Consequently, the clearance sale concept devised as a last minute solution, became a metaphor for the liquidation of the soul of the artistic work. In effect, Provost was, in no uncertain terms, offering up her own artistic suicide, an idea which the other parties involved applauded as “a brilliant idea”, rather than a catastrophe.

The Provost exhibition, which occupied two rooms of the Ottawa Art Gallery from October 11 (2018) until March 17 (2019), embodies all the factors building up to a criticism, not only of the role of the artist within the current institutional system, but also of the inefficiency of that system to foster the free pursuit of

art. It also points to a significant misappropriation of monetary cultural resources, in demonstrating that priority is given to institutional maintenance of the good name of the institution, questioning the sometimes non-existent evolution of the art world and its hierarchical relationships.

From the point of view of a writer, it is important to note that art criticism should serve to convey the intention of the artist, the components of the artwork and the way in which all institutional agents act to give meaning to the artistic practice, operating as a bridge to the community. In an exemplary case such as this, it is the critic's duty to investigate and expose the mechanisms at play, especially when they distort the intentions of artistic communication. Scientific laws may remain immutable, but art is in a constant change of flux, and it is incumbent on the institution to adapt. By failing to do so, it will most likely continue to alter the communicative act that is the artistic practice. Luckily or not,

art will always strive to exceed those confines, interpellating the most disparate communities.



NOTAS

1 Goodman, Nelson. "When is Art". In *Ways of Worldmaking*. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978.

2 Harillo Pla, Adrià. *Arte en el DRAE. Entre significado y referencia*. *Eikasia: revista de filosofía*. Núm. 68. Oviedo. 2016. pp. 265-290

Harillo Pla, Adrià. *El arte en España: una crítica a su legislación*. *ArtyHum Revista de Artes y Humanidades*. Núm. 32. Vigo. 2017. pp. 20-40

3 Ord, Douglas. *The National Gallery of Canada: ideas, art, architecture*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003. p.178

4 Copyright Act of Canada.