

Riopelle's La Joute: A Debate Concerning the Ethics of Public Art

Leyla Goka

The sculptures of famed Quebecois artist Jean-Paul Riopelle (1923-2004) were not what he was best known for. His distinct artistic style, spawned from the revolutionary group of Montreal based artists led by Paul-Emile Borduas and Les Automatistes,[1] is described as “pictorial space...perturbed by a feverishness which overflows the surfaces contained within the canvas or paper.”[2] The total breadth of his oeuvre is substantial: more than 6,000 works in oil, ink, pastel, acrylic and spray paint, about 360 engravings from which there were over 30,000 prints produced, and one hundred or so bronze sculptures. He is most widely associated with his 1950's-1960's paintings in which he began utilizing his palette knife as a substitute for a paintbrush. Also during the 1960's Riopelle diversified his means of expression, turning to ink on paper, watercolours, lithography, collage, and oils.[3] The work from this period also features the abstract expressionist “drip and splatter” technique that found itself being made partial to the likes of Jackson Pollock and, despite their teacher Borduas' disapproval, Riopelle's fellow Automatiste Marcel Barbeau.[4] Riopelle was born into a family of one parent, his father, who was very supportive of his artistic endeavors, even when they took him to Europe upon his achieving an international level of fame.

As a prominent artist from Canada, it does not come as a surprise that the committee of the 1976 Olympics in Montreal, Quebec was interested in including his bronze sculpture-fountain La Joute (1969) in the Olympic city in the

Hochalega-Maisonneuve borough. Already he would have to change the initial design of the piece, by excluding a hydrokinetic cycle that included technical features that would allow the inclusion of a ring of fire on the fountain's circular pool with an enveloping foggy mist effect. This was the beginning of a long and arduous process that would spawn a controversy nearly 30 years after the initial installation of the sculpture. It involved the legal aspects of public aesthetic and the guesswork that would determine where Mr. Riopelle himself would have wanted the final resting place of his monumentally proportioned bronze sculpture to be.[5] The relocation debate between the newer public space of Place Jean-Paul Riopelle in the Quartier International and its original location in the Parc Olympique is a difficult one. Weighed between the technical aspects of the International Charter on the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, adopted in Venice in 1964, and the architectural and artistic harmony of the public landscaping outside of Montreal's Palais des Congrès, both are politically backed and should represent equal "possession" of La Joute.[6] As well as this, the piece proves that Riopelle's work as a sculptor is not to be underestimated nor undermined by his work as a painter.

Riopelle worked on La Joute for a long time – from the summer of 1969 to 1975, the year it was installed in the Olympic city. The piece was planned in several steps, first being executed as a scale model, then modeled in clay, then transposed full-sized to plaster and exhibited at Paris' Fondation Maeght in the fall of 1970.[7] In 1971 and 1972, La Joute was exhibited in France with the elements arranged differently,[8] and finally cast in its final bronze in Italy between 1974 and 1975.[9] The work consists of several "characters," one of which is not included in the current fountain.[10] Called Hibou-Pelle (Owl-Shovel), it is equipped with a name with a double meaning, referring to both the name "Riopelle" and the owl in the form of a shovel. To construct this work, Riopelle used his foundry's unused coal shovel. It is a good example of his command of the bronze medium and shakes off the common belief that he was never able to make the transition from painter to sculptor, an all too common thought. Riopelle also produced a series of owls during this period, which is thought to be the time when his sculptures reached their height. The other characters in the series that make up La Joute are called The Owl-Woman, The Fish, The Tower, The Pole, The Indian, Owl, Isabelle (The Dog), and The Bear.[11] Riopelle treated all the elements in an expressionist manner, not conceiving of them as purely representational, thus making them allusions like in his paintings. There is no story included, simply juxtaposed fragments that seem to resonate in the

imagination. He wanted to integrate fire to the piece to liven up the water but the mechanism was never installed when La Joute was stationed at Parc Olympique. The work was created around the theme of a flag game, one from his childhood to which he added the individual characters. The Indian is meant to be an imposter[12] and also an homage to a longtime figure in Riopelle's life, Archibald Belaney, alias Grey Owl. Riopelle dedicated a sizable canvas to Grey Owl in 1970 entitled, *Hommage à Grey Owl (1970)*. [13]

There were some art critics that were openly disappointed with Riopelle's new adventure in bronze before it was even cast. Upon seeing the unveiling of the preliminary, plaster version of the sculpture at Paris' Fondation Maeght in 1970, *L'Express* published an article by Helene Demoriane that stated (when La Joute's working name was *Le Jouet*),

Only the baroque sculptures of Riopelle (one thinks of Gaudi) and his monumental plaster fountain "*Le Jouet*" give the impression of a terminated buildup. He acknowledges so well that he wants, it seems, to inject inflammable gas to the water of the basin so that it burns perpetually. His paintings don't need those gimmicks. The fire of creation fills them. [14]

This viewpoint expresses the popular mistaken creation of a hierarchy between the paintings produced by Riopelle and the sculpture produced by him. In turn, this opens up a new discussion of the presumed ranking of painting above any other art form. *La Joute* was also met with enthusiasm even before Montreal had won the Olympic bid, with other critics calling it "...a remarkable work that is not as easy to interpret as it looks." [15] *La Vie Des Arts* magazine released an article in the spring of 1971 by Jacques Lepage which said, "This sculpture isn't missing humour: his project, for a fountain, borrows from the totem, junk, Carnavalesque as much as from monumental sculpture." [16]

The animalistic element of *La Joute* should be taken into consideration if one were to further analyze the individual sculptures. Riopelle was a hunter and lover of nature and the outdoors well before his Parisian success as an artist. The use of animal iconography in this fountain and in his later work is highly developed, and the analytical process can begin with his frequent declarations about these particular interests, especially how they relate to Native North American traditions. The adolescent Jean-Paul Riopelle would have accompanied his father to talks given by Grey Owl in Montreal and would maintain an attachment to hunting, fishing and canoeing as much as he would for the city,

automobiles and sports. Andre Breton, leader of the surrealists, described Riopelle as the “superior hunter” or the trappeur superior.[17] It was made clear through the repercussions of his celebrity status that he was a multi-faceted person with a wide range of interests outside of his malleable profession. One could say that he was, like the British-born Grey Owl, attracted to the fictitious theatricality of being like, and indulging in, the practices of traditionally oriented Native North Americans, but *La Joute* allows you to suspect that there was some essentiality in his attachment to that lifestyle that resonated in his important pieces of art that include naturalistic tendencies and wild animals. If we find it difficult to imagine the relationship of an animal to its world, then how can we create a way to represent it in paintings (like Riopelle did during the 1980s) or sculpture?[18] These later pieces create a stage for the contemplation of space and death, a factor that would seem to have been present in all of Riopelle’s work, especially *La Joute* [Fig 3].[19]

Comité S.O.S *La Joute*, a group of Hochelaga-Maisonneuve citizens, initiated the controversy concerning the location of *La Joute* in April of 2002. In 2001, the administrators of Quartier International expressed an interest in installing *La Joute* in the newly built green space directly west of Palais des Congrès, Place Jean-Paul Riopelle. It was a public debate because the work belonged to the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, a provincial museological institution.[20] The disagreement quickly escalated into a reflection on the situation of public art in Québec and the fate of contemporary public art, a category that lacked heritage status and still does not hold that title. What does exist, however, is an institutional consensus that states that a public work of art should be easily aesthetically integrated into the architectural landscape where it has been commissioned.

The City of Montreal, among many administrations, has established a public art program along the lines of the Québec government law laid down in 1981 and revised in 1996 to be titled *The Policy of Integrating Art Into the Architecture and Environment of Government and Public Buildings and Sites*,[21] commonly referred to as “the 1% policy”. The cultural minister at the time, Diane Lemieux, and the Musée d’art contemporain both approved the move, maintaining that the work would benefit from being dismantled and reinstalled there because the RIO did not fulfill its obligations to this policy. It is under the management of the Bureau d’art public du Service de développement culturel, the association that has helped the Société de transport de Montréal integrate

art in the city's new subway systems since 1971.[22] The International Charter on the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites is the root charter and a fundamental document to reflect upon when pondering and reflecting the use of artwork in cities. In 1965, it was recognized by ICOMOS (International Council of Monuments and Sites),[23] a UNESCO organization whose main objective is to protect heritage property of which Canada is a member. Article seven of the charter states: "A monument is inseparable from the history to which it bears witness and from the setting in which it is located. The moving of all or part of a monument cannot be allowed except where safeguarding the monument demands it." Article one stipulates: "The notion of a historic monument includes both the individual building and the urban site." [24] Both of these statements clash with the idea of relocating La Joute, a piece that was not built with the Olympic Games in mind, but was nevertheless effectively integrated into the Olympic facility. When the work was being cast in bronze, several Montreal art patrons bought it with the thought of giving it to the City of Montreal for the Olympic Games, and would be given to the province of Quebec in the end. Those opposing the move argued that Riopelle chose the sculpture's location in Olympic Park after discussing the matter with Roger Taillibert, the architect responsible for designing the Olympic Stadium, the Olympic Velodrome (now the Montreal Biodome), the Olympic Pool, and the Olympic Village.[25] Riopelle is said to have arranged the position of the elements of La Joute after speaking with Taillibert in order to integrate it properly into the outdoor space that the Stadium would provide. A bronze plaque identifying the work that was moved along with the fountain shows the symbolic Olympic rings that Riopelle transformed into an image of an Inuit string game. According to the charters and aesthetic integration laws cited, the work would very well be considered to "belong" in the Olympic Park.[26]

The Palais des Congrès façade features the "integrated" public artwork called Translucide (2002), the kaleidoscopic glass wall designed specifically for the building by Michel Lemieux, Victor Pilon, Jean-Francois Cantin and Martin LeBlanc [Fig 4]. [27] This is an example of a work installed within the framework of the 1% policy. Advocates for and against the move both use the same reason concerning the appearance of the downtown area: the diversity of the architectural elements. La Joute is said to have contradicted the city's vision of adapting the quartier to the 21st century, with Translucide's pixilated imagery that creates a connotation to technology. The Palais des Congrès, however, attempted to justify the integration factor by highlighting the buildings of the

surrounding area, not just the backdrop of the park, facades that are heritage-based and well over a century old. The Rogers and King building, made of stone and brick, was built in 1885 and Fire Station No. 20, in 1908.[28] The Palais itself makes room for the prestige of La Joute, naming the vast hall that leads to Metro Place D'Armes after Riopelle, but does the fountain add to its new home more than its absence detracts from the old one? There is no doubt that following the sculptures removal the Olympic installations had an artistic element drastically severed from them, and that the concrete basin installed to the southwest of the Olympic Stadium will evoke more loneliness and desolation than Canadian spirit. Riopelle's daughter, Yseault, wrote to the Comite S.O.S. La Joute on April 17, 2002. "Regarding the work's being moved, I have already written to you that my father was in complete agreement with the venue and that La Joute was transformed over the years to accord with the spirit of the Olympics. [...] The connotation of the new venue chosen for the work, "a site of high finance,' would have displeased him as well." [29]

There is no way of knowing whether the addition of the complete hydrokinetic cycle would have compensated the relocation of La Joute for Jean-Paul Riopelle. Perhaps the "site of high finance" is too subjective a description for Place Jean-Paul Riopelle, a place that features many other cultural and historic elements unique to Montreal, Riopelle's city of choice after receiving the Order of Canada. At one point, Riopelle was a member of a group of revolutionaries who initiated one of the first waves of Quebec's Quiet Revolution by signing the Refus Globale. Whether or not La Joute is contextually out of place in its current location in the Quartier International, both of the sites it has occupied reflect the original ideas of ethics that Riopelle supported while he was still in the position of an artist who was learning from somebody else. The idea that his art belonged to any such institution would be contradictory to those ethics concerning the location of La Joute. This beautiful and provocative piece of art, now rich with history in itself, belongs only to the citizens of Montreal and the visitors to Place Jean-Paul Riopelle; when it was a part of the Olympic Stadium it belonged to those visitors. The idea of public art should not be a stage for possession, and something as subjective as aesthetic preference is in no way a basis for lawmaking.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aquin, Guy and Cogeval, Stephan, Ed. Riopelle. Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2006.

Beaudet, Pascale. "Thoughts on moving La Joute." *Espace Summer 2003*: 21+. CPI.Q (Canadian Periodicals). Accessed February 28, 2010.

Brien, Jean. "Joute: autour d'une oeuvre de Jean-Paul Riopelle." *Espace (Summer 1992)*: 17-19.

Doucet, Danielle. "Moving Riopelle's sculpture-fountain La Joute, a province-wide debate on public art." *Espace (Summer 2003)*: 24

Gagnon, Francois-Marc. "Riopelle, Heidegger and the Animal" *The Journal of Canadian Art History* 23 (2002-2003): 106-107.

Gagnon, Francois-Marc, "Riopelle, Jean-Paul." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.

Lambert, Serge. *L'Art d'un Trappeur Superieur*. Sainte-Foy, QC: Les Editions GID, 2003.

Musee d'Art Contemporain de Montreal. "General Information: The Musee." Accessed February 28, 2010. <http://www.macm.org/en/informations/historique.html>.

Le Palais des Congrès du Montreal. "Art and Architecture." Accessed February 28, 2010. <http://www.congresmtl.com/en/pdf/Architecture.pdf>.

Reid, Dennis. *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Roger Tailliber. "Le Parc Olympique de Montreal 30 Ans Apres." Roger Tailliber. Accessed February 28, 2010. http://www.agencetaillibert.com/uk/Sport_facilities/Sport_Complexes_/The_Olympic_Complex__Montreal_Canada.asp.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Francois-Marc Gagnon, "Riopelle, Jean-Paul," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.
- 2 Guy Cogeval and Stephan Aquin, ed., *Riopelle* (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2006), 4.
- 3 Francois-Marc Gagnon, "Riopelle, Jean-Paul," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.
- 4 Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973), 220.
- 5 Cogeval and Aquin, 4.
- 6 Pascale Beaudet, "Thoughts on moving La Joute," *Espace (Summer 2003)*: 21.
- 7 Cogeval and Aquin, 113.
- 8 Danielle Doucet, "Moving Riopelle's sculpture-fountain La Joute, a province-wide debate on public art," *Espace (Summer 2003)*: 24.
- 9 Beaudet, 21
- 10 Hibou-Pelle is located in front of the entrance to the archives of the Musee des Beaux Arts du Montreal, 3431 Avenue du Musee, Montreal.

- 11 Cogeval and Aquin, 113.
- 12 Beaudet, 21
- 13 Serge Lambert, *L'Art d'un Trappeur Supérieur* (Sainte-Foy, QC: Les Editions GID, 2003): 15.
- 14 Jean Brien, "Joute: autour d'une oeuvre de Jean-Paul Riopelle." *Espace* (Summer 1992): 17.
- 15 Beaudet, 21
- 16 Brien, 17.
- 17 Lambert, 15.
- 18 Ibid., 16.
- 19 Francois-Marc Gagnon, "Riopelle, Heidegger and the Animal," *The Journal of Canadian Art History* 23 (2002-2003): 106-107
- 20 "General Information: The Musee", *Musee d'Art Contemporain de Montreal*, accessed February 28,
- 21 10, <http://www.macm.org/en/informations/historique.html>.
- 22 "Politique d'integration des arts a l'architecture et a l'environnement des batiments et des sites gouvernementaux et publics"
- 23 Doucet, 24.
- 24 The complete charter is at www.canada.icomos.org
- 25 Beaudet, 23.
- 26 "Le Parc Olympique de Montreal 30 And Apres," Roger Taillibert, accessed February 28, 2010, http://www.agencetaillibert.com/uk/Sport_facilities/Sport_Complexes_/The_Olympic_Complex__Montreal_Canada.asp.
- 27 Beaudet, 23
- 28 See Figure 4.
- 29 "Art and Architecture," *Le Palais des Congrès du Montreal*, accessed February 28, 2010, <http://www.congresmtl.com/en/pdf/Architecture.pdf>.
- 30 Beaudet, 22.