



In 1948 a group of visual artists — not writers or philosophers, generally, but painters and sculptors — published a manifesto which is still cited as the opening cannon in the Quiet Revolution.

Refus
Global
rides
again

This revolution might not have been called a revolution were it not for that manifesto. For — though quite reformist and reasonable — it had a blunt language, a hard-hitting image, a radicalism. It was a *total* rejection of the past — a *Refus Global*.

It set up the idea that the painters and sculptors are radicals in Québec.

Was there truth in this idea? Did the painters and sculptors indeed have such a role of social criticism? Do they have such a role today?

To answer, I think it should be said that yes, the *Refus* was modestly a work of visual art, with its nice splotchy cover design and vertical title lettering by Jean-Paul Riopelle.

"Born of modest French-Canadian families," Paul-Emile Borduas's section begins, "working-class and middle-class, we have stayed French and Catholic to resist the conqueror, to stick with the past. For the pleasure of it, for pride, out of necessity." His urging is: "Break with society's habits, break with its idea of 'useful.'" And Françoise Sullivan wrote a very beautiful section on the dance: "To dance together, dancers must be linked by a conception, by the social needs of the era. I mean *felt* social needs, not abstract ones."

But more profoundly, this was a work of language, polemic, rhetoric, poetry.

It was the mute and silent artists briefly transformed into *speakers*.

And in this it announced the way

things would go. Visual artists would contribute some of the tone of modern Québec. Their abstracts, scattered judiciously over the territory, would lend a cool love of jagged forms and wonderfully arbitrary brushstrokes to the utilitarian architecture old and new, to the skyscrapers and the hot-dog stands.

But it would be the language-artists who would do the social protesting, the singer-composers, the playwrights, the monologists, the essayists. The poets. The novelists.

Language would be all, in the Québec emergence into the world, in the sense of the French language, and its claims in the face of English dominance. But more importantly in the sense of articulating improvisation, vernacular, speech, statement. The only visual forms which would play a big role in this social change were the two visual forms which capture people's faces and make them talk: photography, cinema... Perhaps I should add: cartooning.

But all the while, visual art would flourish and Québec reformers would generally have a quiet respect for their painters and sculptors, would be glad to see the state spend quite a lot on them, and willing to give them, with or without solid evidence, a place in the movement for change, too.

In the eyes of the English-Canadian art world, I think, Québec had *counted*, a full ten or 20 years before she began to count for other English-Canadian milieux. I get this feeling from a family subscription to *Canadian Art*. In all other journalism in the fifties, Québec was patronised, or omitted, or summarised-in-a-phrase, while *Canadian Art*, though published in Ontario, often seemed, to the little boy that I was, to be a Québec magazine. The names of those Sherbrooke Street galleries! The names of all those artists finishing in *-eau*, *-é* and *-ault*.

This early start that the artists had may even explain some things.

Québec painting and sculpture did not arrive on the shores of 1960 with the feeling of inferiority which then plagued almost every other French-speaking constituency. And therefore the people in these arts didn't always see what there was to be overthrown.

So perhaps the real *Refus Global* was Lawren Harris's pine stump jutting up into the sky.

Perhaps it is English Canada which is fighting for its survival through painting, sculpture and all the other activities which have come into the visual arts in the eighties, neon to video to cutting oneself and bleeding slightly for an audience.

This story of two events in Québec City last year would tend to suggest that this is the case.

In April of '89, the *Amis de la Terre* sponsored an art show called *Paix en couleur*. A score or so of Québec painters and sculptors tried to denounce war, in works they contributed, and to proclaim peace. I was among them, with my books of collage, so I'm not at all objective, but I think it would be fair to say that we were all creators of modest reputation, but who felt ourselves marching along in the

REFUS
GLOBAL

MALCOLM REID



In the studio of Fernand Leduc (probably late 1946 or early 1947), Marcel Barbeau, Magdeleine Arbour, Pierre Gauvreau, Fernand Leduc, Pierre Leroux, Claude Gauvreau, who were some of the artists involved in the 1948 publication of *Refus Global*.

armies of twentieth-century art. We managed, however, to involve two very famous men, both Montréalers. We were honoured by their participating, as they were honoured, I think, by the word "peace" that clung to them in this little exhibition hall which used to be Saint Patrick's Elementary School on Salaberry Hill.

One was Frédéric Back, who had just won an Oscar for his pastel-toned film *L'Homme qui plantait des arbres*. Back did not come to Québec City. But we felt his art to be pre-eminently in the eco-pacifist tone we were seeking, and we hung his engravings with pride.

We kept *L'Homme qui plantait des arbres* playing on a video monitor in a side room of the Ateliers Imagine, which now occupy the old school.

The other man was Armand Vaillancourt.

Armand Vaillancourt is one of the fundamental voices of Québec in this century. He is a unique mixture of artistic grandeur and political explosiveness. Unique in Canadian art, I think, and perhaps unique in the whole wide world.

In the whole wide world, that is, with the exception of Mexico. For Mexico is the land that comes to my mind as having produced many such figures, combined political prophets and image-makers. The Mexican muralists are the only comparison that I'd say properly captures Vaillancourt.

We all knew about him before he showed up that night, in his station wagon in the yard of the old school. We all wondered if he'd be as we imagined him.

Out he got, small, dressed in black, his grey hair rolling down his shoulders, his beard silver. He spoke in a friendly, country-flavoured French, but right away he took us over.

"Help me get this out of the back seat, will you?" he asked me, and in a few min-

utes we'd set up in the Ateliers Imagine among our works, a sort of red coatrack from which hung a heavy brown slab of iron. Out of this slab had been cut four desperate, reaching, freedom-hungry hands. In a thick piece of metal, a scene from South Africa or Palestine or Salvador or Berlin had been sketched with an acetylene torch, with the same sureness of touch it would have had had it been drawn with a felt-tipped pen on a page torn from a pad.

In this work, Vaillancourt showed his talent for the plainly-stated figurative. Then he unrolled a series of canvas banners for us on the floor.

In these he showed his love of words. "No claims to art, these," he said, "just demands, just issues of the day... I WILL ALWAYS BE IN THE FIGHT, IF THERE IS AN INJUSTICE SOMEWHERE. LES PEUPLES CRIENT: 'LIBERTÉ!'"

But when his time came to speak, a long series of slides reminded us how much Vaillancourt's career has been associated with the massive rock-like metal abstractions that are the hallmark of Québec Modern. "My casting foundry was torn apart by the mounted police in the days of October '70," he said, "but I've rebuilt, in downtown Montréal. What bothers me most is the unwillingness of the authorities to assure my works of a really permanent place. Of protection from rust and deterioration, of the possibility of going on speaking to the people after I'm gone."

For all his egotism, Vaillancourt was clearly what one calls a driven man.

He'd opened his slide show with rattling-off of statistics of third world exploitation, arms race madness and ecological destruction. A socialist revolution was needed to set all this right. And yet it mustn't be forgotten that the Soviet Union and its friends were implicated in much of

the madness, too; and it mustn't be left out of the discussion that there was still Québec independence as an unfinished project, full of reasonableness, obviously *une évidence*.

In a press conference earlier, he had praised our group for putting on a peace art show. And at a lunch later, he specially praised Thérèse Thérien's sculpture of a proposed public square where the whole world might some day perhaps gather together for peace. It had real wheat growing out of its display-table drawers, and the wheat had reached twice the height at the end of the exhibition that it had had at the beginning. "*C'est très nerveux*," Armand had said.

At another point he took the gentlest of digs at big-name artists who, he said, often dodged his invitations to take socio-political stands.

That he enjoyed the field this left free for him, though, was plain. One by one he ticked off all his famous *frasques*.

The time, as a young man arriving in Montréal from Black Lake in the eastern townships as the *Refus Global* era was beginning to fade, he had sculpted a dead tree on Durocher Street near McGill University into a sort of graceful humanoid. The time a tangled work done for the town of Asbestos had displeased some of the townsfolk, and gotten splashed with red paint. The time he'd hassled with Toronto City Council; he wanted extra time to finish a sculpture in a park they wanted him to quit. The time he'd dressed up as a knight in armour to defend Jordi Bonet's cement frescoes in the Grand Théâtre de Québec against bourgeois detractors. The time he sloshed through the water of his fountain in the Embarcadero Plaza in San Francisco to proclaim its theme of *Québec Libre*. The time he tried and failed to collect logs from the bottom of Montmorency Falls for a giant sculpture he meant to construct with a team of artist-lumberjacks. The rapport he set up with street kids in Santo Domingo as he worked on a public square in a third-world-liberation vein, the kids calling out to him, "¡Jesús Cristo, Jesús Cristo!"

But at the same time, and especially as I saw how little he was open to our suggestions, how insistent he was that we accept *his* invitation to dinner at the Clarendon Hotel, where he had a special deal with the management of this tourist gem in the Latin quarter, and not in any of the more folksy restaurants of Saint-Jean-Baptiste, a scene unknown to him, I realized...

I realized how lonely Armand Vaillancourt feels. How isolated. How obligated he feels, since other visual artists of his generation — he's 60 this year — don't seem to have an interest in social justice, to compensate, to fill the gap, to do everything that everybody ought to be doing, till they're *shamed* into doing their part, too, at last.

I felt Armand as a man who wants to people the entire Québec landscape with steel, stone and wood monuments to humans and their cries, and who knows that all the work of his Hephæstos muscles, and all the flames of his Vulcan furnaces,

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and all the using of his working-class volubility have... oh, laid down a few specks here and there, perhaps.

So sometimes I go down to the courthouse just to contemplate his fountain called JUSTICE! In it, the water gushes out of a tube in which bars lock a prisoner in, and the prisoner's hand reaches up above the gushing water for air. Sometimes I go to Laval to read the free-the-people quotes from a dozen tongues and literatures he inscribed in a sort of garden of boulders. And sometimes I'm Christmas shopping in the Sainte-Foy shopping centre to which they've transported that tree he peeled and sculpted in 1958, and I notice it, and sit under it for a while.

And then there is the case of Greg Curnoe, John Boyle and Murray Favro. They too visited Québec last year, quite a bit later in the summer. They too were a special experience, a confronting of styles.

Three musketeers who seem to enjoy being together at 40 or 50 as much as three little boys of ten. Three leaders of a larger group called the Nihilist Spasm Band, in which the visual artists get sonorous and make a strange kind of music, or noise, or both.

But most of all, three distinct visual artists who have contributed to Canadian visibility in ways that were very much meant to be contributions to Canada's national consciousness, non-assimilation to empires, and social justice, too. Men of the Total Refusal that came out of English Canada in the 1970s. Replacers of the refused imperial images with their attempt at a new, liberated, *Canadian* body of images.

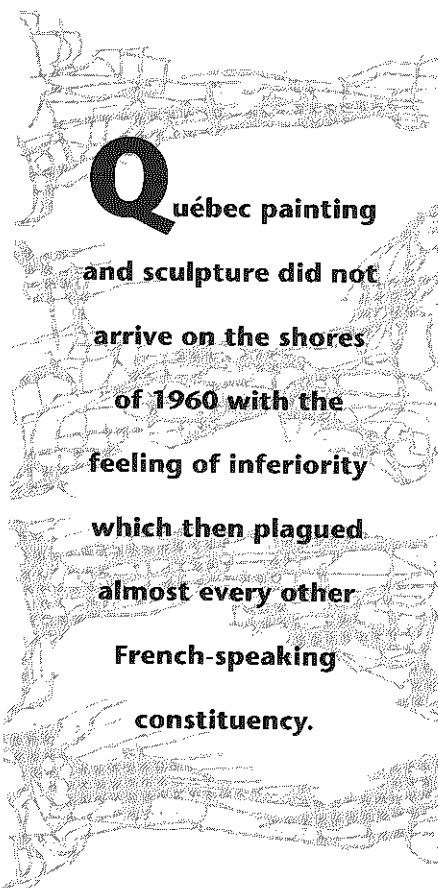
CURNOE: Greg Curnoe is the man who drew the bicycle. (*Drew*, for a Curnoe tends to be gently coloured, its sketch still visible.) The man from London, Ontario. The man who discovered alphabetic stamps and stencils and just couldn't get enough of stamping and stencilling, in painting after painting, statements and sayings and slogans about how Canada has got to be herself. He is, I said to myself after Réjeanne and I had been through a huge amassing of his life's work at the National Gallery a couple of years ago, an artist whose unity can be felt only if you image the teenaged boy, the man, the citizen, behind the work. Only thus do the bikes, and the writings, and the sumptuous nude woman, come together: if we imagine the lean, nervous, elegant New Lefty who's so intense and playful about them all.

BOYLE: Boyle's work comes across on its own more. He has a style, he has a theme, he is inexhaustible, but he is not that varied. I love his work. He does thick-lined, sharp-coloured pictures of Canadian (and once in a blue moon, world) fighters for liberation, caught in a moment of their brave lives. Louis Riel, Norman Bethune, Emily Carr, Woody Guthrie. And yet strangely, Boyle is also the most easy-goingly personable of the three, the best speaker, and is pretty good in French, too, which always makes a difference.

FAVRO: Murray Favro is of Italian, and not French-Canadian, origin. He is a tinkerer, and almost all his drawings, sculptures and videos seem to have to do

with planes, trains, towers, tunnels and mechanisms.

During their performances to a little group, mostly 20-year-olds learning about them for the first time, at the arts centre called Obscure, on the Côte d'Abraham, the three men were cheered along, or plagued, as you choose to see it, by the comments and interjections of a black-haired Québécois artist of about their own age. This man seemed to like them but at the same time to be mad at them. His main theme was: "You guys get all the grants, you guys get all the exposure." He came in always in English, contributing thus, I felt, to the weakening of their communication with their audience, for often



nowadays Québec audiences give anglophone visitors the impression they have no trouble at all with English, and it's hardly worth bothering to use one's French. When actually only *some* of the audience know English, and *all* would feel the message more strongly if a French ambience were established.

After the talks, we went out for a snack, and Curnoe-Boyle-Favro and their friends were glad to dig into the souvlaki-folksy cuisine of the neighbourhood. "That's Serge Lemoyne," Curnoe told me. "What's eating him? That kind of nationalism hurts me. He's had exposure — we put on a big show of his work in London, we welcomed him..."

"Serge Lemoyne!" I said. "I know him. I like his work. He's honoured in Québec. Don't tell me that's Serge Lemoyne!"

It was, and it was a sadness to these anti-imperialist Canadians that one of their principal comrades on the Québec scene was throwing the usual Québec reproaches to the Canadian establishment at them: you rule, you take for granted, you're at ease while we're struggling.

What was wrong?

The black olives and the feta cheese arrived. The homosexuals and the families in Diane's murmured and laughed. What was wrong? What was eating Serge?

How could these three boyish middle-aged men who'd emerged from little-known London, Ontario, 20 years after all those names in *-é* and *-ault* in the Sherbrooke Street galleries, so grate on him? Well, ulcers, moneys, banalities, perhaps. But still, I thought of Lemoyne, I thought of his humour, of his flashing colours, his dribbles, his populist themes, his hockey players, his flags, his birthday packages tied in white string... I saw him suddenly as a young Armand Vaillancourt, anxious to be part of the rumour, part of the rough-and-tumble, part of the debate, and discovering bit by bit that this isn't really what Québec expects of its painters, sculptors, printmakers.

That it's really much more current in *English* Canada for the men and women of paint, videotape, the acetylene torch, to be in there making statements on where the nation is going. That the language arts there are always struggling to escape Hollywood's influence; that music there is lively but not sharply distinct from American music; that literature is confusingly eclectic, but...

But that when it comes to visual art, those green, grave Group of Sevens in the basement of the National Gallery on the banks of the Ottawa are indeed an identifying core. A core unconfused with any other core in the world, out from which Canadian visual exploration can radiate even today. A root that is adaptable, in the case of artists like Curnoe, Boyle and Favro, who want to adapt it in this way, to a social action message.

So that what we had, perhaps, was a Québécois artist in the curious position of envying English-Canadian artists in their *role in society*.

Times change.

As we chatted, leaping from one subject to another, leaping from olives to feta to skewered meat, I felt these Canadian visitors proud of having contributed to the free trade debate, ready for its sequels, full of their 50 years of playful creativity, ready for 50 more, feeling like children at play *and* workers useful to society. And sure that Québec has all that and more, and taught them much of what they know.

"Molinari, now there's a radical artist!" Curnoe said, and I thought of how few statements of any kind I'd heard from the great man of hard-edged oranges and reds during the whole referendum period; of how alone Armand Vaillancourt seemed to feel as he raged against injustice; of how envious Serge Lemoyne seemed to feel as he listened to these Canadians tell tales of controversy and activism. Of how long it had been since the *Refus Global*.

The vertical Refus Global type on p.9 and the splotchy pattern on this page are based on the original cover lithograph by Jean Paul Riopelle.

Malcolm Reid's column is a regular feature in Border/Lines.

REFUS GLOBAL