



***Chair de lumière* by Marjolaine Béland: How Disruptive Conditions and Mimicry Capture Attention and Favor Empathetic Resonances**

Louise Boisclair

Postdoctoral fellow, Université de Montréal (FRQSC)
Montréal (Québec), Canada
boisclairlouise@yahoo.fr

Abstract

This paper examines the experience of *Chair de lumière*, an artwork by media artist Marjolaine Béland, that aims to create conditions of the apparition of the double, our double of light. By analyzing the disruptive conditions of illusions and performances that the artist orchestrates, we come to understand how cumulative effects –the architectural components and accessories, the involved audio and video technologies, the infiltration of two performers in the space and the interplays with light, transparency and reflection– build an aesthetic event in five different Times. The key factors of the aesthetic event are the mimetic human or non-human performances. The resulting empathetic experience with projections/reflections/refractions and the performing bodies induces ambiguous and tense sensations. Then the phenomena of mirror neurons contribute to clarify these ambiguous feelings, by distinguishing the visuomotor and the visual aspects that are entangled. Finally, the miming gestures of the participant and one performer and vice versa are exemplary of an intense affective moment constructed by micro-disruptions and resonating in the suspended Time.

Keywords

Apparition, double, light, mimicry, movement, empathy, mirror-neurons, performance, reflection, projection.

Disruptive Conditions in Actual Art

In actual art creators use many disruptions, be it scenographic, choreographic or technological, to divert habits of the participants and create singular conditions for building an event.

To start, there is often a blurring of the perception to destabilize the body, to alert its presence and to capture its attention and orient it. The inaugural disruption may be brutal (stroboscopic lights, extremely loud sounds, even conditions of vertigo), but the rupture of convention can also be incremental with tenuous disruptions as with the performative and immersive installation *Chair de lumière* by media artist Marjolaine Béland. With the participation of two performers, her main objective is to create the conditions for the participant-spectator to be present to the apparition of his or her double. This double of the body is provoked by variations of light, as captured and projected

through a technical apparatus that she tries to make disappear in order to create room for the phenomena of appearance and vanishing and also by the powerful amplified sounds that subliminally affect the balance of the body in acting on the vestibular system.

In September 2013, Béland invited the public to three Evenings-Events at La Chaufferie, au Cœur des sciences de l'UQAM, in Montréal on Thursday September 12th starting at 6:26 PM, Saturday the 14th starting at 6:22 PM, and Sunday the 15th starting at 6:20 PM. Personally, I participated in the September 14th event, which started a few minutes late for final adjustment to be done. Before opening the doors, she asked us to wait in the park while the sunlight was decreasing. These three Evenings-Events constitute the creative portion of Béland's doctoral research and thesis that she just completed.

***Chair de lumière*: General Description**

A brief description of the event found in its invitation states: "*Chair de lumière* is an immaterial and impalpable work whose form is on the border of media arts, film and performing arts, and where the 'faire œuvre' of the phenomena of appearance is based on the ephemeral, the improbable and the fugitive, on the nebulous, the vague and the uncertain, on the nonlinearity and the unexpected, on the imperceptible sensory impression of the viewer." [1]

In other words, *Chair de lumière* proposes to the 'participant-spectator' an experience where he or she, while remaining themselves, becomes the actant of the experience going through a quest of indexes. It goes from exploring the architectural space and listening to sounds, to looking at the screens and window reflections, to observing the effects of a light projector and of a kinect capturing movements that are superposed to the seeing of performers walking outside and, at some other time, to the performers playing with a veil before final mimicry with one participant.

In front of the entrance, a laptop screen on a pedestal shows five chronometers with citations in the margin. Attracted by the screen, participants-spectators star at these chronometers, trying to figure out what dimension of time the first one is calculating while the others, indicating a specific duration, are waiting for their unknown cue.

A few moments later, the four speakers start to emit more and more amplified and transformed recorded envi-

ronment sounds, interfering with the physical sounds of the locus and its occupants. Gradually the external environment filled with anonymous people is doubled by the projection on the south wall screen provoking illusion and distortion. The performers discreetly stroll outside, visible from the mural windows west to east and vice versa, while their duplication on the south wall screen opposes the other portable screen on the north side of the room.

First dilemma: is it in real time or in delayed time or both? Hard to say, maybe a mixture of both.

Second dilemma: by watching one screen, what do we miss that is being shown on the opposite one, the same thing by concentrating on a direction east or west or a specific portion of the room or the accessory of the veil?

All of these conditions with the deployment of the performance live and captured create five different phases of a new spectatorship. As Béland writes, they are:

- Time0: time prior... 22 minutes;
- Time1: time of exploration and immersion. 13 minutes ;
- Time2: time of illusion. 10 minutes ;
- Time3: time chiasmus. 30 minutes ;
- Time4: time of suspended work (...). [2]

As I experienced, this spectatorial investment evolves from Time0, observing artificial light taking place and searching for indexes, to Time1, from peripheral spatial attention to intensive immersion, to Time2, engaging an encounter with things invested by the performers and movements generating reflections, to Time3, movements of performers and engaging mimicry with participant-spectator before capturing somebody else, to Time4, dissolution of illusions, movements and projections.

Béland's installation integrates different qualities and intensities of light (daylight, light from the screens, the projector, filters, etc.), various form of movement (walking, dancing, playing and fighting with the veil, etc.) and of their double (projected, captured, lighted, reflected and transformed). First, she invites us implicitly to attune with the end of the day outside. Second, once having entered into the room, she slowly captures our attention, playing with duration through the sound projection and she mobilizes our expectation with the chronometers. Third, she coordinates the superposition of the recorded sources of images and sounds with the performance live *in situ*.

Immersed in a monumental space with big fenestrations on the west and east side, the set up built a continuous and changing effect of doubling things and humans, with increasing illusion up to engaging our body in mimicry.

From disruptive conditions to illusion

Béland's technoartistic 'mise en phase', different than 'mise en scène' more stage oriented, crosses disruptive conditions from the architecture (whistles from heaters, pipes noise, heat from radiators), from the use of accessories (lines of red paper pasted on the windows, white veil on the windowsill), from a mixture of devices and softwares (wall giant screen, computer screen on a pedestal,

kinect, projector, four speakers) and from the participation of two professional performers infiltrating the inner and the outer space, and eventually transforming us in mimetic performers.

The scenography induces:

- a rupture from accelerated urban life to a slowness of waiting;
- a delay while watching the twilight;
- a gradual pulse taking of the place in tune with the descending darkness and the increasing artificial light;
- a transitive passage from individual presence to collective state;
- a plurality of projections/reflections/refractions transforming the doubles;
- five phases building a dynamic field for mimetic human and non-human performances;
- resulting in an empathetic experiencing disrupted by tensions.

Parasite Issues before Integration of Meaning

The slowness is disruptive to urban life of Montréal's downtown. First of all, the waiting awakens our perception and stimulates compensatory repositories while various questions parasitize or divert our attention.

Why starting at a specific time related to the decline of daylight and its shadows?

What do the five chronometers refer to?

Why is there a veil on the windowsill? What narrative function does it assume? Is it a micro-event metaphor of the global event?

Are the bizarre noises from the pipes and the hot air coming from the radiators conditions included in the scenography?

Are the red lines taped on the window there to capture a specific area, if so where is the camera? Is it for filming what has been done before or will be done?

Are the people traveling in the east and west sidewalks part of the event?

What is the significance of the capturing of a participant by a performer that mimics the movement she leads?

What happens to the body with these multi-layers effects affecting the individual and collective presence?

Progressively, as the magic begins to operate, the questioning proportionally vanishes as the body crosses and the bodies cross various states and feelings.

Body, Embody, Perform

"Our own bodies form lenses of experience, perception, cognition and disruption." [3] More and more immersed in *Chair de lumière*, the body feels, the bodies perform and embody variations of doubles. To perform here is a complex ongoing process, becoming to per-form in the words of Nathaniel Stern:

The conception of a continuous embodiment, however, allows us to rethink bodies as formed through how we

move in, and relate to, our surroundings. Embodiment, I contend, is not a pre-formed thing, but incipient and per-formed. [4]

Per-formed is to be underlined here in many ways. To begin, the waiting body, then, the alert body. With the intensification of the presence. The broadcasted mimetic body, the flesh in the Merleau-Pontian sense of this term in the encounter with images and others. The sensitive/emotional/mobile body. The inanimate and animate bodies, the physical and projected bodies in the space. Throughout the postdisciplinary per-formance orchestrated by the 'metteure en phase', the bodies of humans or non-humans participate in the illusion. The 'effets de présence' build an event of appearance and disappearance. As Pitozzi proposes:

The effect of presence manifests the passage of a "body" that fits and takes place into the reception of the viewer: the trace of a movement, an image or a sound that is not there and at the same has been there, but that is no longer there now. [...] The effect, as a product of presence, corresponds to a combination of sensations that the presence induces and inscribes on the sensitive plate of the viewer's brain to produce a resonance in his muscles, in a shared dimension of empathy. [5]

It is about apparition and its modalities in the interval just before and after the illusion. It is an epiphany that induces empathy.

Affective forces that vary from one participant to another (the weight of expectation and the sensory exacerbation, the search for meaning and the plus or less easy integration of resonances, the cuts from one direction to another, etc.) and various emotional tones (the esthetic delight of some images, the joy or interest of movement mimicry, the magical effect of illusions, etc.) modulate attention and enlarge the depth of immersion.

By orchestrating the technoartistic phases with the performance of actors and their contamination of the spectators, Béland questions the political context of the accelerated speed, the virtual temporal components of urban life. By interweaving the virtual and the actual, in the Deleuzian sense of these terms, she invests spatiotemporal dimensions. Illusions open the ability of the body to feel the action seen and heard 'as if', things and beings carried out internally but externally inhibited and disinhibited. This feeling of doubling or being doubled introduces an empathetic bodily experience. Mimicry induces connection with the other. Our double? But also it provokes ambiguous feelings by seeing the performances or by feeling them as if we were doing them ourselves.

Empathy is central to understand how performance, human or non-human, is a conscious and unconscious source of mimicry. This emotional and motivational matrix influences constantly, and is also influenced by, our aesthetic experience and its multiple variations, not to say disruptions, and the ambiguous tensions that they provoke. In order to clarify what is happening, neurophysiology of

empathy and mirror neurons can add some inspiring clarifications.

Empathy and Mime in the Light of Mirror Neurons

During the evening-event, the many unexpected lighting and reflecting micro-events intensify our resonance, we become empathetic with the performers, the others and their doubles.

According to neurophysiologist Alain Berthoz, empathy requires a change of point of view or of perspective. It consists of looking in our own way but within the extension of another's perspective. To do this, it relies on the memory of the past, while being oriented towards the future. Our memory has built a vocabulary of actions, intentions and related consequences that are used for anticipating situations that we encounter. [6] When we empathize, we feel what we see with an ambiguous tension. May be this tension is related with seeing only and with seeing as if doing.

These empathetic tensions gain light here with the phenomena of the mirror neurons described by Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia. [7] After the discovery of mirror neurons in the macaques' brain, other studies have examined their role in action recognition and imitation in human brain.

Movements that we see have resonance in a certain zone of our own brain, as if we were doing them ourselves. Then movements from other entities penetrate our corporeity as if we had performed them ourselves, but only if we have similar movements in our vocabulary. Mimicry between the two performers that we look at and between one performer and ourself and so on, invades our individual and collective consciousness field. It has a visuomotor component that corresponds 'as if we would do it' if we have the vocabulary and, if not, only a visual component. Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia explain that, without any visuomotor resonance, it can be called following James, 'cold' or 'neutral' perception, which is devoid of any emotional colouring. [8] Nevertheless it still penetrates our body. I propose that these distinctions explain subtle feelings related to the empathetic experiencing. Neurophysiology adds neural information to diffuse experienced feelings.

So the contrast between the waiting and the incremental intensification brings at the forefront some of the conditions that otherwise we incorporate without acknowledging them. The perceived movement around us appears 'as if' they were lived in our own mirror. In fact, they are seen *in situ*, they are reflected in window and projected on screens. Mimicry reverses the inhibition of the body by unfolding its potential with our visual and/or motor connection with others. For example, in the fifth phase before ending, after the mimicry between the two performers, each performer mimics a selected participant.

When I am captured by the performer, I move in a certain way, to see to what extent she can imitate. What a surprise, her movement is very similar, except for small interruptions. As Massumi has discussed about the politici-

zation of the power of mime conducted by former United States president Ronald Reagan, “That power is in interruption. A mime decomposes movement, cuts its continuity into a potentially infinite series of submovements punctuated by jerks.” [9] The effect of mime is immediate and affective. It carries an excess of intensity. It makes you the center of the interconnection, even more when you see your doubling on the screen and in the window. As Masumi highlights:

The affective “atoms” that overfill the jerk of the power-mime are monads, inductive/transductive virtual perspectives fading out in all directions to infinity, separated from one another by dynamic thresholds. [10]

In *Chair de lumière*, with the suspension of disbelief, a kind of magic settles. Through ninety minutes of passing-

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dynamic thresholds, a close relationship with doublings inaugurates a mimetic circuit between action, reflection and sensation. Progressively the hunt for causes fades until more complete immersive feeling prevails. In this suspended time modalities of illusions and sensorimotor modalities of tensions are subsumed by the contentment of an empathetic event and its waves of empathetic feelings.

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Author’s Biography

Ph.D. in semiotics, UQAM, Louise Boisclair is an author and researcher, member of *Archée*, and postdoctoral researcher at the Université de Montréal. She has published numerous articles, two chapters, coll. “Esthétique”, PUQ, in 2013, and one chapter, *Figures de l’Art # 26*, in 2014. Her book *L’installation interactive : un laboratoire d’expériences perceptuelles pour le participant-chercheur* was published by the PUQ (PAES), January 2015. Her postdoctoral project proposes to highlight the modalities of affect and empathy in interactive and immersive installations, by crossing experimentation, observation and theorization.