

Exhibition Review
Philomène Longpré's *Octopus*
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As we entered the darkened gallery space we came upon an interactive video installation. *Octopus (2003) (figures 1 and 2)* by Philomène Longpré was shown at Galerie Sans Nom in Moncton from September 16th till Sept 29th. In this installation a video of a woman is projected onto a structure that resembles vertical blinds. The audience is initially unaware of their involvement in the art work.

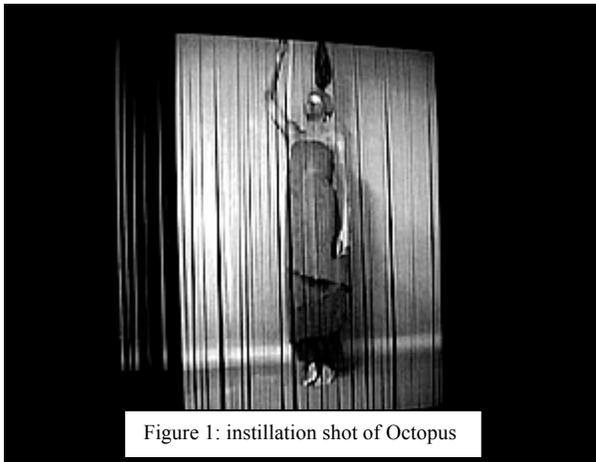


Figure 1: installation shot of Octopus

Longpré uses sounds recorded from nature for the audio tracks in her work. Some examples of recordings include water, wind, or noises emitted from a volcano. As these sounds from nature poetically surround the audience, the woman (Longpré) in the video;

painted and dressed in black with an inverted pony tail, constructs a space reminiscent of a cocoon or a spider's web with twine that she pulls from above, out of our vision. The construction grows until it surrounds her body entirely. The building of her environment is sped up with special effects, which gives a freaky effect to the piece, and comments on the sense of time, adhered to control. Once her environment and surroundings are complete, she turns her attention to the on-lookers. When the eyes of the audience meet with the eyes of the artist there is a period of sensitivity. If the audience moves, sensors in the structure sense their movement and the vertical slabs begin to shake. The woman in the video continues with a ritualistic dance.

It takes the audience members a while to come to the realization that the piece is moving because they are moving and interacting with it. As the video circulates, and

their participation ceases they become aware of their involvement. Their movement through space causes a domino effect of the space becoming chaotic. The subject thus becomes the physical space and how an individual constructs it. The woman in the video controls and constructs her environment, much like the way the audience learns, observes, constructs, and begins to control their own environments. This reflects our own subjective displacement within a schematic system.



Figure 2: instillation shot of Octopus

Philomène Longpré received her BFA from Concordia University. She is currently working towards her MFA from the Art Institute of Chicago, where she received a 120 000\$ scholarship on her arrival. Longpré explores themes of communication and interactions between individuals and technology in her work. Longpré redefines the space around her in order to define the body. She does this through the process of building and through a ritualistic dance, which makes the invisible space visible.

Octopus was shown at Galerie Sans Nom because it won the Festival International du Cinéma Francophone en Acadie (FICFA) competition. Jennifer Macklem an Assistant Professor in sculpture at Mount Allison University was among the judges. Macklem fought a member of the panel in defense of this piece. When asked why she felt the need to fight for it she said that she felt Longpré was very involved in the art making process. She was exploring advanced digital technology, and invested a lot of time in the process.

As a woman's point of view, she understood the performance as being psychologically intertwined with the self; revealing herself yet concealing herself at the same time.

It was very interesting entering the gallery as a group. People interactions with the work varied. Some went behind the piece to watch the light projected beyond the screen onto the wall. Others made hand puppets on the vertical blind screen. Some walked around it and others walked through it. It was beautifully interactive.

Julie Bouchard; assistant curator of the show, has an interesting take on *Octopus*. In her essay "Octopus" in the program of the show she constantly refers to the figure as "he". For example she says:

*This being must experience the constraints forced on him by space, adapt to them, and find his own space.*¹

In describing why she does this she says that the figure is neither man nor woman, that he has no face, and know specific identity.

Christine Redfern; a writer for Mirror, wrote in her review of the show:

*An Octopus has strange eyes. Their eyes can focus on two separate scenes simultaneously, and sometimes each eye is specialized to see either low or bright light.*²

In this analogy Redfern explores the interactions involved in a single space between two individuals or two different perspectives. The two perspectives are between both a physical and a virtual space.

This work presents a woman, wearing a dress, and a ponytail. These things in our culture are related to femininity; this lead to an understanding that this is a female

¹ Octopus Exhibition Program

² Redfern, Christine, *Charting Space; Philomène Longpré's electronic octo-art entices*. Web-resource

being. There is an understanding that comes with the work. It seems to address a psychological state that all women experience. A feeling of entrapment. When the woman peers out to the members of the audience, there is a confrontation. The audience disturbed her in her construction. Her ritualistic dance relates to many domains of femininity and the body and the mechanisms we as women explore to remain in control.

The natural sounds on the audio track remind one of women's representations in Art History. The woman is seen as belonging to nature. These noises can either reinscribe women as nature, or can be critiquing it. It makes sense as a criticism because she is in the work defining her space or defining her own subjectivity. It is all about the control one creates for oneself, and not being defined by culture.

Octopus is an important work not only because of the interests and interactions that it makes one aware of, but also because it is about women defining their own terms. The feminist movement has opened up many doors for women and continues to do so. This artist defines her own space and arouses our curiosity to do the same in the gallery space which becomes ours on entrance. One may be unaware that we are defining our own space all the time. Here this invisible phenomenon has been made visible. This work is conceptually compelling and deep at many levels. Philomène Longpré is defiantly worth checking out. Every visitor's experience will be a new one.

Bibliography

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Redfern, Christine, Charting Space; Philomène Longpré's electronic octo-art entices.
http://www.montrealmirror.com/ARCHIVES/2004/010804/philomene_longpre.html accessed 10/25/2005 7:35

Figure 1 from http://archee.qc.ca/images/245_octo01.jpg visited 10/27/05 at 9:55

Figure 2 from http://www.file.org.br/imgs/instalacao_octopus.jpg visited 10/27/05 at 10:00