

QUALIFIED DEMOCRATIZATION

The Museum Audioguide

I. Introduction

The audioguide, that chattering box that members of the "general public" strap on for enlightenment, is becoming increasingly integral to the temporary art-museum exhibition, or more specifically to the "blockbuster." Audience is the object here: the bigger the better. Aggressive advertising campaigns and other marketing practices work hard to ensure that the non-habitual, art-viewing public arrives at the museum's ticket counter. Once the uninitiated are inside, the audioguide takes over, telling them about what they are seeing. Historians, artists, critics and art administrators, the educated, unconditionally dismiss such popularizing tools as too elementary. Yet, their popular presence seems to warrant more than a look of disdain.

What follows is a case study, a detailed analysis of the content of the English-language audioguide produced for the exhibition *Betty Goodwin: Works from 1971 to 1987* which was held at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal in 1988.¹ An intensive critical reading of its written text suggested the groupings of statements into five large categories: directions for looking; spatial directions; technical information; statements for coherence; interpretations. What follows is a reflection on the significance and, often dissimulated, function of these in the taped tour.

Jill Corner, the author of the audioguide was given a difficult task. Contemporary art poses a particular dilemma for any didactic supplement to an exhibition. Since its inception, the museum's desire to bring art, if not to the masses, at least to a larger audience is an ideal that has periodically surfaced in its pedagogic rhetoric. The idea that art should be readily understood by the general public is logically impossible because the general public is perceived as a status quo which reproduces the dominant social order. Art cannot communicate with the status quo, it must resist being absorbed into its normalizing system, it must present the "alternative." Yet, at the same time, as contemporary art's marginality ossifies, artists and all the other intellectuals that surround their production (museum curators, critics, historians, etc.) insistently ask of their social order more respect, more attention, more understanding and more influence.

The museum has its own problems to deal with. Over the past decade, government funding has become less and less reliable. One solution has been the attempt to increase the number of visitors because attendance not only

generates income from entrance fees and merchandise sales (audioguides could be included here), but also proves an institution's worthiness as a recipient of public money, and makes it more enticing to potential corporate sponsors.

When faced with contemporary art, members of the general public operate on reactions and assumptions which both draw them in and repel them. On the one hand, the foreignness of both the art itself and the social norms for its viewing, taken with numerous other factors, tend to generate feelings of discomfort and intimidation in the uninitiated. On the other, visual art can be compelling to the curious because of its unusualness. This base attraction, combined with a persistent belief that visual art, unlike nuclear physics, should be understandable to everyone, draws people in.

It was through this barrage of conflicting interests that the audioguide for the Goodwin exhibition had to navigate. Jill Corner, the guide's author—a PhD in Romance languages and literature had to respond to the public's mistrust of contemporary art, their wish to understand and their deficient art education. She had to answer to the museum's desire to educate, while at the same time refraining from being too demanding, because if the guide made the user's visit pleasant, the exhibition would enjoy increased attendance as the result of word-of-mouth advertising (a key component in the marketing of cultural events). She also had to please the artist and curator, who both acted as overseers in the writing of the text, ensuring that their understandings of the various works discussed were respected through the whole process. Corner was asked to simultaneously actively engage users of the taped tour, and to pacify them.

Despite the harshness of my criticism in the following essay (which imposes a whole other set of criteria), it seems that Corner's sensitivity to all parties, and her honest discussion of her vision of Goodwin's art resulted in a product which did the impossible. Response to the guide, according to Corner and a representative at the museum, as well as some users who I spoke to, was generally very positive. It was rented by approximately one third of the exhibition's 45 000 visitors.² Apparently, the artist and curator were sufficiently satisfied to have approved the text.³ Presumably the museum was also content with Corner's work because they produced the guide as she wrote it, and then went on to hire her to write tours for the Borduas and Jean McEwen exhibitions. However, there was a price to pay to have everyone pleased, as Corner herself said about the audioguide, "The whole thing is a compromise." The significance of this compromise, I will suggest, was much more far-reaching than a sign of goodwill.

II. Now Introducing Betty Goodwin: Affirming stature and privilege

The guide began with a quick greeting from the museum's director, Pierre Théberge. As much as his brief welcoming words wishing the tape's users an enjoyable visit can be seen as a simple gesture of protocol made possible by the

mass-produced recording, its privileging effect cannot be overlooked. Having the director's voice addressing each visitor was the next best thing to having the real person there. As Eric Gibson says, "After all, once that tape is running and the voice is softly droning in one's ear, who can tell whether the sound is reality or illusion?"⁴ Users were immediately given the fleeting illusion that they had been accorded the honour of being received by the director. Instead of having Théberge guide listeners through the entire exhibition, this task was left to a more aurally-pleasing professional reader (a male voice in the French-language audioguide and a female voice in the English version). So, with listeners duly welcomed and slightly flattered, the faceless but smooth, well-articulated voice took over.

Guide users had already shown their confidence in the Museum's validation of Goodwin's art, by both paying the exhibition's entry price and renting the audioguide. Nevertheless, the tape's first priority seemed to be to reassure them that the artist was worthy of such a prestigious show, and that they were justified in giving over their trust and attention to her work. The urgency of establishing Goodwin's stature was done at the expense of leaving the user at the threshold of the exhibition for several moments, without telling them what to do or where to go. This goes against the accepted practice of audio-guides.

The narrator's voice began, "Welcome to the exhibition. I shall be your guide to this selection of drawings, etchings, installations and collages by one of this country's major artists..." (1L08-10).⁵ Contents of the exhibition described, Goodwin's stature as an important artist was immediately established. The tape continues, "...whose work has represented Canada in Europe and the United States, as well as being shown from coast to coast" (1L10-13). International exposure is coveted in any field, especially in a country like Canada with a colonial history. Goodwin was legitimized by the fact that she has been accepted into the art world in her own country as well as the "true" cultural centres.

The guide went on with its first spatial direction, then continued with its positioning of Goodwin:

A Montrealer born and bred, she pursued her vocation alone and untaught for many years. This initial lack of formal training may well explain the power and originality of her mature work, which cannot be assigned to any specific artistic movement or school. Indeed, the very fact that it is unplaceable in this sense is an indication of its unique quality. Unlike most artists of her generation, Betty Goodwin has generally chosen a representational style based on line drawing, while verging on the abstract, is always strongly expressive and emotional in its impact on the viewer. We experience her work directly, with no filter (1L14-24).

Although some information is carried in this paragraph, its overall function seemed to be other than to inform. The listener's civic pride was evoked, then he/she was convinced of Goodwin's originality. The importance of "cre-

activity," "individuality" and "originality" in works of art has mythic status in Western culture. To imply that these traits were found in Goodwin's work was almost a guarantee that a general audience would recognize and acknowledge their worth as markers of distinction. We were told that Goodwin's representational style was unique in its time; a fact requiring a whole body of knowledge to verify. Yet, instead of naming a few of her contemporaries and briefly describing their work, the tape covertly contrasted Goodwin's art to dispassionate, art-for-art's-sake abstraction and definitively placed it in the realm of the emotional. This too could be seen as validating, for, as Corner says, "You must present the art, to some extent, in terms that people already know, what people already feel, things we have in common." And, the "emotional" is what the author seems to have perceived her audience as being able to comprehend.

Michael J. Parson's study of cognitive development as it relates to aesthetic experience, is a useful tool for hypothesizing about the nature of the presuppositions which colored the perceptions of Corner and her "ideal listener." Through some two hundred interviews, done over a period of ten years, Parsons created a five-stage model to help describe and comprehend how different people spoke about a specific group of paintings. A "stage" is defined as a cluster of related assumptions or ideas, which go together logically, and are used by individuals to understand a painting.⁶ The theory, I think Parsons would agree, is socially and culturally determined; its notion of "progression" in understanding of art—from a child through to the true initiate in art, capable of making her/his own critical judgements—is based on a Western model historically bound to a perceived linear "development" of Occidental art. The coherence of the model relies on the relative cultural homogeneity of its interviewees, who were all from in and around Salt Lake City. Since the concerns demonstrated in the audioguide correspond so well to a so-called, "stage-three" conception of art, similar assumptions and definitions can be seen to have been operating in Corner's writing. Part of the stage-three approach to art is as follows:

There is the artist on one side of the painting, and the viewer on the other. They mirror each other. Each must experience the feelings that constitute the expressiveness of the painting. This idea is captured on the one side by the use of words like 'real,' 'genuine,' and 'honest'; and on the other side by the idea of 'an inner feeling.' On the artist's side, the painting is expressive if the artist actually felt some emotion that she put into the painting. The alternative is that she is being conventional, insincere, faking it for the money.⁷

Furthermore at this stage " 'originality' " means having some deeply felt feelings of a kind not imitated by others."⁸ If we return to the above lines from the audioguide, we see these ideas affirmed. Why Goodwin "persued her vocation alone and untaught for many years" was not considered a handicap but rather it

was an explanation for the artist's originality and authenticity (the words "power" and "mature" reassured that the artist was nevertheless not naive). Instructions to surrender oneself to a pure and personal emotional response, encouraged the listener to indulge their emotional understanding of Goodwin's work.

Throughout the taped tour Goodwin's work was repeatedly placed in this realm—as we will see later, the types of interpretations offered were also highly emotionally charged. Late in the tape, Goodwin's working process was described as reflective: "[The artist's sketch books] are revealing glimpses of how the creative process works, of the slow gestation of ideas" (11\28-29), but this intellectual work was left to the artist. Listeners were told, "this is intuitive, not cerebral art, which follows its own logic. There are no academic solutions here" (5\17-18). According to Parsons, while stage-three art viewers are aware of the more objective criteria of academics, they are not sure how these are applied, and thus continue to favour subjective responses. In the above statement, listeners were told that they need not have any insecurities about requiring an expert to understand Goodwin's art, it is accessible through their intuition. Again, listeners' appreciation of the work was facilitated, particularly if they shared the author's "stage three" understanding of art.

It should be pointed out that, although Corner did not overly challenge guide users' cognitive skills, neither did she pander to their potential hunger for a sensationalist treatment of Goodwin's work. Gibson condemned the Met's AT&T Tours as revealing: "The Metropolitan's view of art as nothing more than a carrier of narrative effect [which] creates a... corrupting association between art and entertainment. After all, if the whole museum experience boils down to storytelling, then what's to separate *Washington Crossing the Delaware* from *Platoon*?"⁹ The Goodwin tour cannot be accused of such a blatant trivialization of art. Corner, commendably, refused to exploit rich melodramatic details from the artist's personal life to spice up her text. The temptation was there; one need only look at the gossipy treatment of Goodwin in the popular press to see this. In *La Vie en Rose* Sophie Gironnay cannot resist telling us, melodramatically: "[Goodwin] Avait toujours peur, quand elle était petite, que son père, marchand de tissus de santé fragile, ne rentre plus à la maison."¹⁰ Even the artist's Montréal dealer contributed to the artist's myth; he is quoted in *Châtelaine* as saying, "Le soir du vernissage...l'air était chargé d'émotion. Je me souviens avoir pris dans mes bras une personne qui pleurait à chaudes larmes."¹¹ Corner stated that she knew people would have liked to hear about "the central tragedy of Goodwin's life," but she consciously avoided using the artist's biography. Furthermore, with Goodwin acting as a sort of editor for the audioguide text (the artist has stated "Je ne veux pas être anecdotique, faire du sentiment."¹²), sentimentality and the anecdotal were avoided. Consequently, attention was not on the artist, but remained on the work—or, more accurately, as we will see later, on the guide's emotional interpretations of the work.

Before beginning its commentary on specific works, the audioguide's introduction continued with a brief commentary on the contents and layout of the show, warning that the exhibition was not laid out in chronological order. Corner commented, "This audience definitely prefers chronological order. For people in the world of art criticism this may seem banal, but for the general public it is extremely comforting. It is often the only thing they can hang onto: 'She was a bit older when she did this one.'" The audioguide said the works develop organically as themes evolve and mutate, "while still showing discernable links of form and content." Non-chronological order, "to some extent imposed by the heroic scale of certain works" (2L04), was proposed as an opportunity which would "enable us to follow connected ideas both forward and backwards through the series *Vests*, *Tarpaulin*, *River Bed*, *Passage*, *Swimmer* and *Carbon*" (2L06-08). It can be argued that the audioguide did more than simply remark on the connections between works, and that coherence was its obsession.

III. Coherence: Don't worry, it's all connected

A recurring problem in the audioguide was that, often, its statements seemed to be offering information, while in reality they rarely delivered anything concrete. The form adopted by the guide's text, which recalled a discursive essay, was responsible for inappropriate expectations. Description, technical terms and background to works were given; the themes identified were taken directly from the curator's catalogue text. Interpretations, although emotionally loaded, were held firmly in the matrix of an apparent order and development. Even the words of experts, critic Robert Storr and the artist, were quoted. But, rarely did any of these deliver coherent statements about the work, let alone the elaboration of any thesis. The expert opinions supported nothing which was said before or after them in the text; they were just there. And, where themes were systematically developed in the catalogue, in the audioguide they were simply attached to the work without explanation. Perhaps the most subtle and insidious example of this dissimulation of function, were the statements which made thematic, stylistic and technical connections, as well as less specific associations, between the works. Apparent information was often suffocated beneath a redundant chorus, insisting on the coherence of Goodwin's oeuvre and the audioguide's text.

One of the threads that sewed the guide together was the *Swimmer* series: "versions of {the *Swimmers*} have occupied her for the past six years" (4L15). The series was continually referred to when discussing other works in the exhibition. Here is a sampling: "This diptych and drawing numbered 10 [*Rooted Like a Wedge*] develop from single figures into a more complex composition in which they are, as it were, fused together, evolving from the supple delicacy of the *Swimmers* to a stark, wedge-shaped mass approaching the abstract, pushing figuration to the limit" (8L19-24). Later, in relation to the figures in a work entitled *Carbon*: (fig. 1)

"Notice how the isolated figures here [in *Carbon*] revert to the suppleness of *Swimmers* and form a more simplified composition" (10\L23-24). And further on: "In no. 13 we see one example of another theme developed from the *Swimmers* that of the porteur or carrier" (11\L04-05). Although Goodwin does work in series, the audioguide's continual referring back to previous images often seemed gratuitous.

In cross referencing works, characteristics of different orders were continually compared without warning or explanation. Many of the connections made were unverifiable, and were lost in the flow of the soothing voice. Let us examine the following statement: "These drawings [the *Swimmers*] carry their own history with them [visible evidence of erasing and other changes], as do the vests and tarpaulins and the walls and pillars of her installations [Clark and De Mentana Street projects]" (5\L25-27). The *Swimmer* series as well as the tarp drawings and vest collage/prints were grouped together because of the shared characteristic of "carrying their own history." But, while the "history" in the disaffected spaces integral to the Clark and De Mentana Street installations existed as a result of the accumulated wear from the objects and the people that had once occupied them, the concept of "history" in the *Swimmer* drawings was totally different; their history was that of Goodwin's working process. One "history" was *found* by the artist, the other was *created* by her—the tarps, found objects covered with the artist's drawing marks, were a combination of the two. The idea of history in Goodwin's work and in contemporary art in general is an interesting and pertinent one, but in failing to explain significant differences in its manifestation from one work to another, the guide negated the user's potential understanding and the only information communicated was that the tarps, *Swimmers* and two installations were connected.

Consider another example. The tape's brief account of the artist's early work began well, mentioning how the forms in the vest, tarpaulin and kite series followed one another and "Finally the wheel comes full circle as the kites evolve into a *Vest Kite*" (3\L15-17). The formal connections between these works made the evolution quite evident—among other things the guide pointed out how the vests and tarps are both "found objects" (3\L01). The leap to the next work, an installation entitled *Four Columns to Support a Room*, (fig. 2) was much less concrete. Nevertheless, the tape went on to suggest a seamless continuum in an attempt to demonstrate unquestionable coherence. To make its point, the guide did not offer convincing arguments, but rather pointed to superficial similarities. The voice had asked users to stop the tape to take a closer look at the tarps, etc.; upon reactivating the machine they heard: "From these techniques of rolling and folding [used in the vests, kites and tarps]—a rolled tarpaulin resembles a pillar or column—comes the *Clark Street Project*, entitled *Four Columns to Support a Room*, of which number 4 in this gallery is a photographic record" (3\L20-23). The explanation continued: "She wrapped them [the pillars] in paper blackened with oil, an equivalent to tarpaulin, creating a space whose coverings defined it, just as the empty vests defined the wearer" (4\L03-05).

The fusion of these works was complete but incohesive. The sleight-of-hand in equating a rolled tarpaulin with the pillars in the installation (which were in fact square, thus requiring the addition of the image of a "column" for the statement to make any sense) was more than questionable. The tarps and the paper were both impregnated with oil, but this did not make them equivalents; their differences were as important as their similarities. Furthermore, while the flattened vests—presented framed and under plexiglass—could be imagined to define a wearer, the paper wrapped around the pillars delineated an actual three-dimensional space.

Comparing the works of an artist is a very informative part of the practice of viewing art, but only if the nature of the similarities and differences are clearly considered. When visible similarities between works were pointed out by the guide, users felt the pleasure of recognition. When false and tenuous connections were made, and little or no time given to reflect, listeners could do little more than have faith and accept that what the tape was telling them was true. The above examples showed that the result of this was the presentation of inaccurate information, and, hence, a superficial understanding of the work. The audioguide benefited from the authority of its false academic tone, but the facade was hollow. Corner said: "Challenging is all very well but you have to remember that the people who hire audioguides are people who are rather afraid of forming their own opinions and who are already intimidated by Modern art. That is why they want the audioguide, to tell them what to think about this or that painting." Guide users, hungry for reassurance that there was unity in the chaos confronting them, were prone to be impressed by this posturing.

IV. Opportunities Lost:

Looking for concrete information and educational content

One of the basic assumptions of my critique is that an audioguide text should be written with extreme clarity. This is not to say it could not be poetic; however, the tape's rapid linear flow requires that users constantly be kept aware of what is being delivered to them. Any confusion, like that found in the Goodwin audioguide, inevitably results in taking the focus away from the work and putting it on the words delivered by the guide. While the mediating effect of an audioguide is, by definition, inevitable, it is best minimized. Offering useful information and basic art-viewing tools, is one way the audioguide can positively intervene to facilitate a connection between art and viewer on their own terms. The Goodwin guide attempted to do this but again ran into difficulties.

Background information on the works was presented sporadically in the text, but it passed over opportunities to expand these into brief discussions of larger art concepts. The audioguide gave listeners the insight that Goodwin's visual work incorporated citations from literary works of authors such as Anne Hebert and Brecht: "[The title of] *So certain I was, I was a horse* is taken from the work of

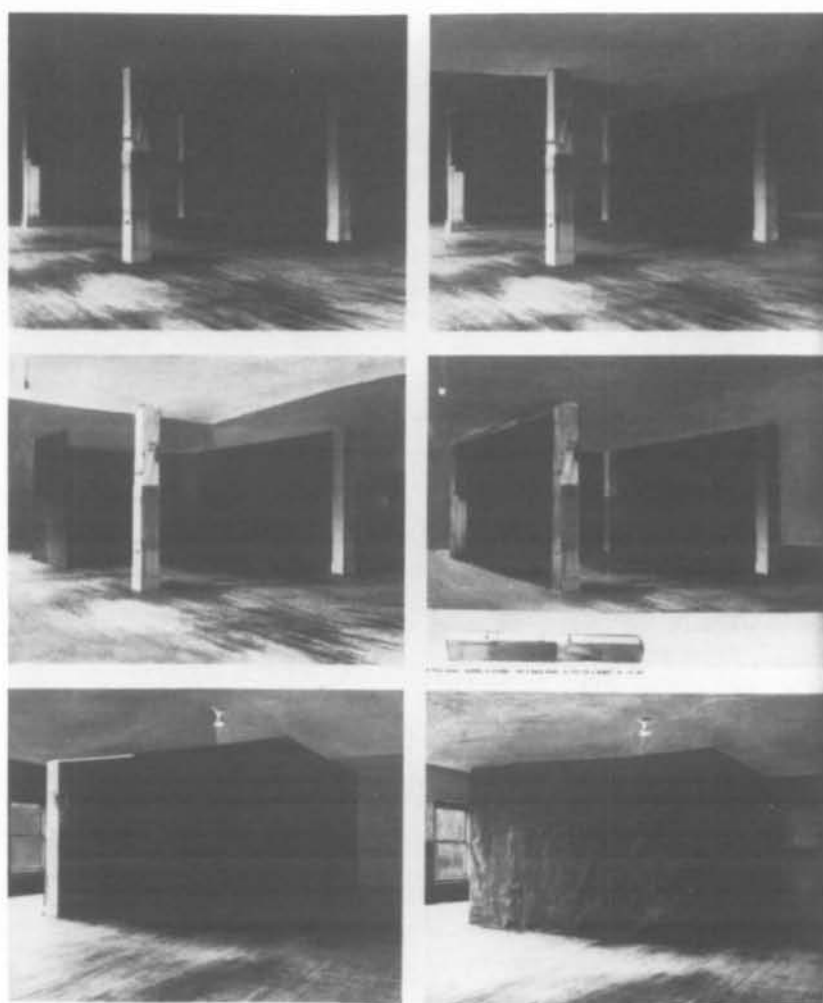


fig.2 Betty Goodwin, *Four Columns to Support a Room*, 1977-80, oil on black and white photographs mounted on card board, 101.5 x 84 cm, Coll. Marielle Mailhot, Montréal. (Photo: Betty Goodwin)

Antonio Artaud, as are other of her titles" (5\108). Yet, no further information was given about these authors or their works and no discussion of the significance of the inclusion of written language in visual art works was undertaken. Visual sources were also sometimes given: old tombs and cemeteries in Florence, Egypt and Czechoslovakia for the "Passage" series (9\119); a press photograph of two journalists murdered by death squads in El Salvador for *Figure* (1985-86) (painted directly on a photostat enlargement of the source image) (10\126); life-saving techniques for the "Swimmer" series (5\112). The notion that art draws from many sources was implied, but how the artist's interest in, for example, cemetery architecture led to the abstract "Passage" series is not obvious, nor was the significance of directly appropriating and painting on a politically charged news photo.



fig.3 Betty Goodwin, *In Berlin, A Triptych: The Beginning of the Fourth Part (or In Memoriam: Tryptych, the Beginning of the Fourth Part)*, 1982-83, oil and graphite on paper, plaster, tin, steel, plywood and pine, variable dimensions, The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. (Photo: Brian Merett)

Identifying a work's medium—what it is made of—and the techniques which produced it, are naming processes fundamental to our understanding of art. Although only about a dozen statements could be classified under this rubric, they were generally well presented in the guide. One of the best examples from the tape discussed technical aspects of two drawings from the *Swimmer* series: "These drawings are made with charcoal, graphite, pastels and oil pastel on sheets of vellum rendered translucent with linseed oil. It should be noted here that Mrs. Goodwin never works on canvas, preferring the delicate quality of materials such as vellum, transpagra, ozafilm and geofilm" (4L17-22). And another concerning the work *Carbon*: "The figures here have become stiff, solid masses of charcoal dust ground into wax, painted on light aluminum panels instead of paper" (10L09-12). In the use of art vocabulary, however, confusion again took over. The most interesting case was that of the introduction of the term "installation." This art form was probably unfamiliar to most guide users, despite its importance for contemporary art, especially in Montréal. Admirably the tape ventured to offer a

definition: "Installation art, discovered in the early 1970's, enables an artist to take over an existing space and use it as support of inspiration for creation. The installation is a result of intervening in the space to change or emphasize its meaning, of conceiving a work to occupy it, or of using the space's own history and memory" (3\L25-4\L01). Although most academics and practitioners might have trouble with the word "discovered," they would probably consider this to be more than adequate as a general definition for a certain type of installation art. It worked well when applied to Goodwin's Clark Street and De Mentana Street installations. However, subsequent uses of the term became confused.

Without making any reference to the change in the use of the term, the large, multi-component sculptural work *In Berlin, A Triptych: The Beginning of the Fourth Part* (fig. 3) was presented as "Goodwin's most eloquent installation" (7\L06). The work was said to have been "created for an earlier exhibition," thus it had nothing to do with "changing or intervening" in the M.B.A.M.'s gallery space, as the earlier definition had suggested. It had no more impact on the meaning of the space it occupied than would a nineteenth-century landscape painting. This misuse of the word "installation," as defined by the guide, was repeated when *Two Figures with Metal Shelf* (fig.4), a contained work which included drawing and sculptural components, was referred to as an installation (11\L16), and when the *Swimmer* series drawings were said to be installations, because the sheets of vellum hung directly on the wall made "the watery environment spill over the entire wall, drawing us, the viewer into the work" (5\L01-03). If teaching was one of the audioguide's goals, consistency and clarity should have been of utmost importance, especially when introducing new vocabulary to a novice art audience. In the end, audioguide users did not master the use of the word "installation;" in the confusion, it simply became jargon.

Directing the guide user's gaze through a visual work was a task for which the audioguide seemed well suited. Simple description, such as, "Number 14, the Triptych of 1986, shows a smaller figure echoing the dominant one" (11\L12) and the pointing out of visual elements, "Notice the additional materials incorporated here—pins, rope, tape and even in number 2 seaweed" (3\L12), helped the uninitiated viewer see relationships and details they might have otherwise overlooked; it guided them through the process of seeing. Through this exercise of naming, the user was able to feel the pleasure of discovery which comes with becoming increasingly familiar with a work of art, and it began to teach them how to see what otherwise might have been simply chaotic or meaningless visual information in a way that made sense. I was only able to find approximately thirteen such statements in the guide. It certainly could have benefited from more, especially when describing larger and more visually complex works.

To sort out the complicated, multi-component sculptural work *In Berlin* (fig. 3), all the help offered was: "This assemblage incorporates fragile, unnaviga-

ble bridges, an impassable black passage, and a miniature stage which holds a megaphone/loudspeaker" (1\08-10) and "Between megaphone and loudspeaker you will see a human ear. ...Notice how these structures are not solid, but layers of paper over a fragile armature" (7\17-27). This seemed too reductive considering the work's visual and spatial complexity. The only visual ordering offered to guide users for the 9.7 meter long piece *Carbon*, with its twelve or more figures, was: "You will find that this immense mural shifts and changes as you approach and move around it" (10\15-16). If more description of the work were given it might have been possible for listeners to perceive these changes.

Directions for looking have the potential educational function of teaching guide users to see. As well, they keep the listeners' attention firmly anchored on the work in front of them. The merit of such a focus follows from the assumption that, when discussing an art work, it is compulsory that any proposed reading be supported using visual givens found in the work (i.e. what is there). The audioguide showed little evidence of sharing this axiom, opting instead for an abundance of interpretations which, at times, seemed completely disinterested in taking into consideration anything more than a few details from the work they were supposed to be explaining.

V. Interpretations: Life's existential crises

The final large category of statements was "Interpretations." These declarations, proposing what specific works were about, made up a significant part of the taped tour: approximately forty were given in the twenty minute tour. They spoke of transformation, mystery and primitiveness, and of beauty beside suffering. Their preoccupations included death and the dead: "Once again it is the instability, the impermanence of human existence that is brought home to us [in *Passage For Words*]" (7\23); pain and suffering: "Throughout the drawings of the *Swimmer* series we have seen areas of blackness—wounds, words, blackened metal—implying the *weight* of pain that roots humanity in its own reality" (9\02-05). A variety of other existential concerns were cited, such as fragility and vulnerability: "These drawings are abstract arrangements of lines and masses, frangible structures to bridge the abyss" (9\22-24); impossibility and futility: "These works also speak to us of the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of communication" (6\06-07); uncertainty and ambiguity: "Notice that all Betty Goodwin's figures are of indeterminate sex. Their ambiguous couplings are not illustrations of specific acts, but rather archetypal symbols of struggle and involvement" (6\18-22). In its final moments, the audioguide summed up Goodwin's art as being about the rather sombre and lonely sides of the human condition: "We have seen how, in these landscapes of the mind, themes of absence and memory, transience and impermanence, physical closeness and psychic isolation, interlock in a prolonged meditation on the human condition that is both moving and illuminating, if in

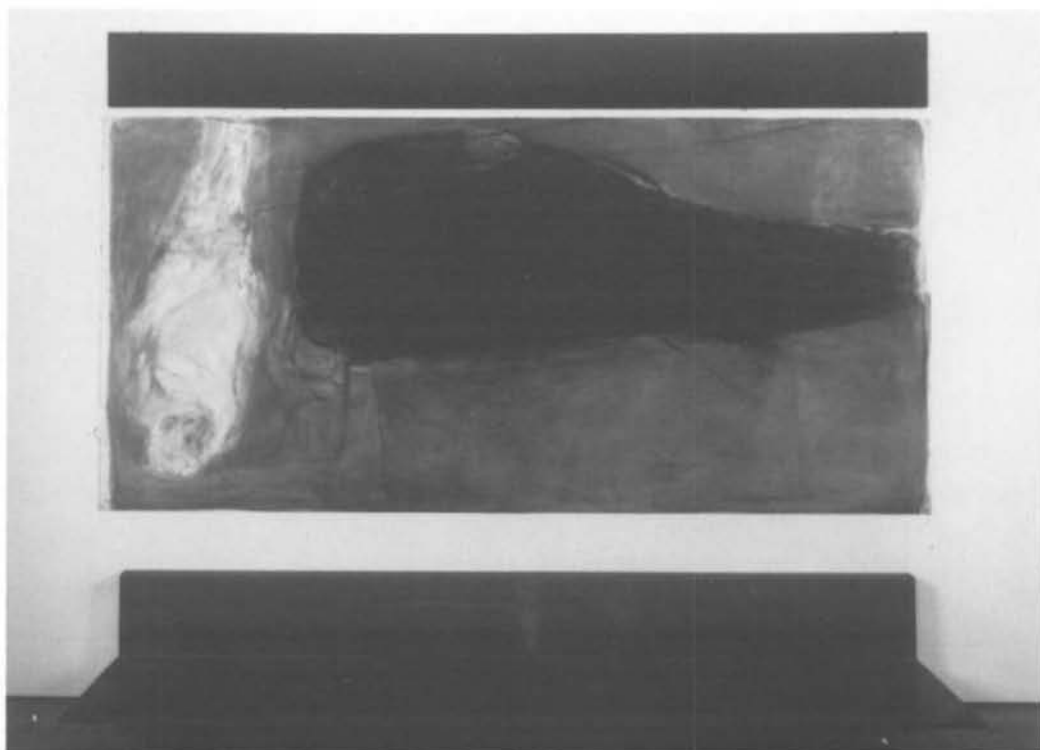


fig.4 Betty Goodwin, *Two Figures with Metal Shelf*, 1985-1987, oil pastel, pastel and charcoal on transpagra, steel, 37.4 x 213.4 x 40.5 cm (metal shelf), 96.5 x 213.4 cm (drawing), 20.3 x 213.4 (metal plate), Le Musée du Québec. (Photo: Patrick Altman)

the last analysis deeply tragic" (12L16-21). The interpretations enveloped the artist's work in this aura of seriousness.

At times the interpretations given on the tape were quite complex. One of the most eloquent concerned the paradox of beauty coexisting with much less uplifting notions: "Despite the implicit suggestion of pain and loss, Betty Goodwin's art makes a ravishing visual statement. Perhaps it is the tension between this aesthetic seductiveness and the underlying pessimism that gives the work its power" (12L13-16). Although still subjective, these interpretations were exemplary and unusual in their attempt to come to terms with, and to explain what was perceived as a conflict between content and formal treatment in Goodwin's work. The art object did not get left behind.

Consider the guide's interpretation of *Carbon* (fig. 1), which had the effect of carrying listeners further and further from a visually complex work which, as we have seen already, was presented to guide users without consideration of the difficulties it posed. After presenting the work and locating it chronologically in relation to two other pieces, interpretive statements began: "This remorseless, post-apocalyptic vision replaces the water context of the *Swimmers* by fire and burning

air" (10\8-9). Reading the white ground in *Carbon* as "fire" and "burning air," by contrasting it—and connecting it—with the water-like ground used in the *Swimmer* series, resulted in a vision of this work as being an image of people in the midst of an atomic blast. This interpretation not only neglected to take into account the seriality in the repeated groups of interacting figures, and the particularity of their different postures, it also lacked a convincing explanation as to why the ground of the work was considered to be "burning air" (although two of the figures do have what could be thought of as fire coming off their backs, but this did not justify the unexplored leap). After a technical observation, the reading continued with a new tangent following from the nuclear-explosion vision, "In their rigid immobility they [the figures] could perhaps remind us of the shadows on the walls of Hiroshima" (10\12-13). A conceivable reading, but instead of explaining its inconsistencies (e.g. the fact that some figures in the work are not large black "shadows" but are only suggested by faintly-sketched outlines), the voice continued with a new take on the scene: "see how the stiff limbs of the figures project out towards the edge of the panels in a kind of entreaty, invading your own personal space" (10\17-19). This exaggeration of the aggressiveness of the figures' relatively well-contained limbs towards viewers seems have been used to obliquely reinforce the conclusion of the interpretation: "The violence and brutality which are only hinted at in earlier drawings are here made explicit" (10\19-20). The "violence" in *Carbon* can only be qualified as "explicit" if we accept the audioguide's tenuous proposal that the figures in the work had suffered the effects of a nuclear explosion.

Other interpretations of the same work condensed into single sentences the leap-frogging associations, carrying listeners further and further from the source. "The very title *Carbon* has innumerable resonances. As the artist herself points out, carbon is an organic material. The word implies fire, burning, destruction, but also natural and inevitable organic dissolution into a stony permanence, mineral immortality" (8\28-9\02). The word "carbon" implied fire and burning but why destruction? And how could the transformation process from living organic material to inorganic carbon be related back to the work's many figures? As the interpretations progressed, listeners could have easily mistaken this rhetoric babble for information about *Carbon*, despite the fact that it had little to do with the work, because they were no longer engaged with the piece they faced. The principal relationship was between the user and the audioguide, the latter serving up its own images and meanings for the former's imagination. This was a good example of what Reesa Greenberg described as the reason intellectuals spurn audioguides: "the voice on the tape vies with the art as the object of power and desire. The aural threatens to become aura and orgy."¹³

Ironically, early on in the tour, the tape sagely warned that "Looking and seeing are two different things, and Betty Goodwin's art demands the full participa-

tion of the viewer" (2/L12-13). The guide, in fact, made full participation impossible. Its user's attention was continually distracted away from the work, mediated by the tangential interpretations it proposed.

It could be argued that my demands for the tape were too priggish, and that its interpretations simply gave users licence to engage in their own flights of interpretation. For, admittedly, those often rarefied sparks of personal insight triggered by a work of art do frequently constitute the beginning of one's appreciation. Corner said that her interpretations were intended to shine different lights on the works, "not all of them will work for everybody, but just one or two might. ...Anything is valid if it is something that people can key into." I would definitely agree with this approach, but the colours of Corner's "lights" were too closely matched and they were positioned too close together to offer different perspectives.

It is perhaps not surprising that the results of Corner's search for meaning in Goodwin's art corresponded to Parsons' "stage-three" perception of art, given that the emotional content alluded to in the guide's introduction was found to a great extent in the interpretations. For viewers demonstrating stage three characteristics, the work, "has to say something about humanity."¹⁴ Parsons continues: "What this development [into stage three] requires is the ability to empathize with persons or situations represented in the painting. One gets beyond the surface unpleasantness by grasping what things feel like from inside. This empathy is what the paintings express, it is the real subject."¹⁵ Goodwin's work offered Corner the perfect opportunity to bring up the unpleasant but human feelings she saw radiating from the pieces before her. The author said, "I was trying to offer them genuine *aperçus* that I have had."

Although the author was probably too close to her interpretations to realize their homogeneity, a serious problem arose when their unity contradicted the audioguide's claim that the art was open to many different readings. At one point this was stated expressly: "Betty Goodwin's work always offers us numerous possibilities of interpretations, none of which is definitive" (1/L13-15). The concept that an art work can contain several different meanings was perhaps foreign to the non-art viewer, yet it is a concept that is often essential to the understanding and discussion of contemporary art. The audioguide was well positioned to demonstrate how a single work could be read in a variety of ways, but it failed to do anything more than raise the possibility. Some interpretations did contain words like, "perhaps," "may" and "probably," but eighty percent of them were stated as fact: definitive and authoritative.

Even in one case, where a question concerning the meaning of a work was followed by a multiple-choice list of possible answers, thematic likeness among the choices severely limited the breadth of admissible readings. "This [drawing, *Passage for Words*] is our first encounter with the notion of *passage*, an important one in Betty Goodwin's work. Passage to what? Rebirth, death,

emptiness, change?" (7\L21-23) There was no suggestion, for example, that the "passage" in the work could have been referring to political revolution, or travelling on the metro, or the interior spaces of Robert Morris' minimalist sculptures. Such variety might have better implied to listeners that they could bring their own interpretations to the work. Gibson points out, that taped tours often pander "to the perception among the public that a work of art contains an idea, generally one, to 'get', some secret behind the picture inaccessible to the eye."¹⁶ In the end, despite any mention of the receptivity of Goodwin's work to polymorphic meanings, the guide ended up playing into, rather than challenging, this assumption.

In its last moments, the audioguide informed listeners, "The abiding image we take with us is probably that of the fragile beauty and dignity of the human body in adversity as a metaphor for life" (12\L11-13). Although, this might have been the case for those who shared Corner's very specific reading of Goodwin's art, everyone else found their understandings denied by the audioguide.

VI. Audioguide schizophrenia

So far, this essay has examined the tape's text only in disassembled parts. In considering it reassembled, as users would have heard it, it is clear that the audioguide text presented too many disparate ideas in too short a period. It was often impossible to evaluate, or to even apprehend what was being said. This exacerbated all the problems discussed to this point. Given no time to think, listeners could only accept and absorb.

The following excerpt referring to Goodwin's three part sculptural installation *In Berlin*, typified the flow and sequencing of information in the audioguide; and all this in sixty seconds:

This is our first encounter with the notion of *passage*, an important one in Betty Goodwin's work. Passage to what? Rebirth, death, emptiness, change? Once again it is the instability, the impermanence of human existence that is brought home to us, and the uncertainty of communication, physical, verbal, or emotional. Notice how these structures are not solid, but layers of paper over a fragile armature: the idea of wrapping, of tarpaulins, recurs, as does that of transparency and opacity. As always in Betty Goodwin's creations, we, the viewers, are an essential part of the process. The installation needs us to enter it, if only with our eyes, to look at it from all angles and feel its possibilities and impossibilities. Turn off your machine now and take time to do this (7\L21-8\L04).

In the lines preceding this passage an extremely reduced enumeration of the work's three different sculptural assemblages and several possible connections with other works were given. Attention was directed to the sculptural component containing

a megaphone, loudspeaker and an ear. While they were locating this, listeners were given the above statement on the importance of "passage" in Goodwin's work. Having registered this "fact," and perhaps still looking for the ear and loudspeaker, the listener was asked a question and had to quickly select from the given choices to answer it. No time was given to even consider the list. The next sentence came in with, "Once again," implying that what was to follow should be familiar to the listener: "the impermanence of human existence is brought home to us." This interpretation hits hard, raising several questions: Did the guide user recall seeing this concept demonstrated in relation to a proceeding work? Did she/he agree that it was relevant to this work? What did it mean? No time to think, because the interpretation continued, adding, "and the uncertainty of communication," of all kinds "Physical, etc." Only a second was left for listeners to get a mental picture of what all this might have meant, then attention was directed back to the work, not to find evidence for these tenuous interpretations, but to invite them to verify that the "structures" were made of layers of "paper over a fragile armature." The fact that this technique was only employed in one of the three sculptural elements in the grouping, and not the one the listener was probably still standing in front of—which was made of metal, was potentially very confusing. Furthermore, locating the paper itself was not altogether obvious because the artist had treated it to look like metal. The tape's voice did not stop talking: "as always," again implied that another generalization (with which the listener should be familiar), was about to be said "we," [the guide users] "are an essential part of the process." The listener now had to find answers to a whole new series of questions: How was she an essential part in the process of all proceeding works? How was he part of the process of *In Berlin*? What process? "the installation needs us to enter it." Guide users only had a split second to consider how their physical entry into the works might bring new light to all their unanswered questions, when they were stopped by, "if only with your eyes." So how did looking make viewers part of the *In Berlin*'s process? They were told to look at the work from all angles, which is good advice for looking at any three-dimensional work, but the tape did not ask them to see how the work changed from different vantage points or how its parts related. Instead it asked listeners to "feel its possibilities and impossibilities." What did that mean? Totally bewildered, the guide user obeyed the tape and turned off the machine to experience something that was so vague it was beyond understanding. Or, perhaps, she/he didn't even bother turning off the tape and just kept going with its flow to the next sequence of statements, equally as disconcerting. In the one minute allotted it was impossible to untangle this mess of open-ended statements.

All incongruities and obscure statements became hidden in the rapid flow of the text, held together only by insistent statements of coherence. Information was given but there was no time to *think*, let alone evaluate. Interpretations called on listeners' emotions but there was no time to *feel*. The audioguide slid its way

between users and the art, thinking for them and feeling for them.

VII. Secure and soothing

One satisfied user of the taped tour prepared for the Goodwin exhibition told me: "I wouldn't have understood anything without the guide. It explained why the artist did what she did." A curious response given how little the tour did to promote any real understanding of Goodwin's work in its users. But, perhaps the simple illusion of being given insight was sufficient, because the guide responded to the more immediate needs of its users.

The guide packaged the Goodwin show for uninitiated viewers, attempting to reduce the impact of anything which could have been disconcerting. Most "leisure" activities have a defined temporal element: art does not have a beginning and end in the same way. The audioguide responded by leading users through the show in twenty minutes and putting a time limit on how long each work was to be looked at (a minute and a half, maximum, according to Corner). People are also generally unaccustomed to being asked to think, especially in their "leisure" time. Confronted by a work of art, one generally responds to Western cultural convention and is drawn into a struggle to find its meaning. But how could any sense be made of Goodwin's strange marks? And, if they did think of an interpretation, could novice viewers really trust the meanings they found? Most importantly perhaps, what would they do if their ultimate fear was realized and the work didn't mean anything to them? The guide again stepped in and told listeners what to think. The extreme passive mode into which the audioguide put listeners, was the mode of leisure: experience mediated through technology. Adopting this familiar position allowed them to move through the show in security.

At one point in my interview with Corner, she compared her guide to "*Sesame Street*," in that it was a "series of images that passed by the ear as they passed by the retina." This, I think, sums up the audioguide's attitude toward educating the general public: make it into entertainment. Unfortunately, while simple addition and the alphabet may be efficiently taught to pre-school children by employing mass-media strategies, art is much more complex and must be enveloped in media with great care.

VIII. Creating a new market

Although the audioguide severely reduced the potential for Goodwin's art works to meaningfully engage viewers on a personal level, it did manage to preserve and offer something of the degenerate but enduring social status accorded to *fine* art. Consequently, it gave the exhibition experience something that entertainment usually has difficulty delivering. Reesa Greenberg explains, referring to the ideas of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu: "The true educational function of the Acoustiguide and similar tours, then, is not a democratic one. Quite the contrary. ...One learns to

yearn and later to demonstrate the requisite Kantian disinterest of the true initiate. One learns to spend one's time looking while listening, supposedly in pursuit of knowledge, all the while lusting for the chimera of privilege imparted by the voice on the tape."¹⁷ The taped tour's illusion of privilege made it all the more enticing to users; and the Museum profited.

The audioguide in its totality—cassette deck and earphone, and the words on the tape—can be seen as what Leiss, Kline and Jhally have defined in their book about social communication in advertising as “positional goods.” These are goods which, when possessed, signal a difference in social status.¹⁸ If audioguide users were looked down upon by intellectuals, the machine they carried signalled a privilege over the uninitiated who wandered through the exhibition unaccompanied; they had access to the official meaning of Goodwin's works. After the exhibition, those who had rented the guide were able to display their knowledge of high culture to friends, co-workers, or who ever would listen: “Yes, I saw the Betty Goodwin show. She is an important Canadian artist, internationally known. It was powerful but tragic.” Corner herself said that she gave guide users enough vocabulary and a few references, “basically so they could show off.”

What the guide created was a new patron class, a new market to be exploited. Those who rented the guide felt privileged because they were offered the illusion of access to the official meaning of Goodwin's work and to the social distinction this conferred upon them. But, because audioguide users were given no tools to develop their own appreciation of the art, they remained dependant on the Museum's product for their interpretations and feelings of privilege. With the guide at their sides the intimidating art exhibition had not seemed so bad, so when they returned for the Museum's next big show—and the pleasant exhibition experience the guide offered made this likely, they would be compelled to again rent the guide. In this way it contributed to audience development, the generation of income and the Museum's marketing schemes.

Museums' interest in marketing has grown strong over the past decade. The resulting marriage between commerce and high culture is said to have numerous advantages: “l'amélioration de la communication entre le visiteur et son musée, l'augmentation du nombre de visiteurs et leur satisfaction plus grande, l'augmentation du nombre de membres, et enfin l'augmentation des revenus découlant des droits d'entrée et des cotisations des membres.”¹⁹

Writers who extoll the virtues of marketing for museums boast of its financial benefits in times of government cut-backs, while at the same time invoking the museum's democratizing role. The two seem to be inseparable. One result of the marriage, according to the above article, is: “une volonté de changement dans l'orientation de nos musées, volonté qui se manifeste en accordant une importance plus grande à l'implication du public dans la conception et l'application des programmes d'exposition.”²⁰ Translated into marketing speak, this

says nothing about democratization, it says: Tailor the product to meet the demands.

This suggestion that art should respond to the demands of the general public, the status quo of capitalist culture (its enemy), would send shivers down the spine of any true blooded modernist or post-modernist. However, the Goodwin audioguide helped to ensure that this increasing concern with getting a larger public into the museum happened without disturbing the existing hierarchy of the art world. It was a solution to the museum's dilemma of how to solve its financial problems, while at the same time not altering its aesthetic bias nor its exclusive structure.²¹ Far from threatening the intellectual art-world's valued notion that art is socially and culturally autonomous, the audioguide "reproduced the category 'art' and its hegemonic functions, the naturalization of alienation and the legitimization of social hierarchies."²²

The uninitiated are often intimidated by contemporary art's pretention to be beyond the comprehension of a casual viewer. When they arrived in the Museum, this fear was combined with their potential lack of knowledge about the social conventions of looking at art in a public temple of high culture. Uneasy, they stood at the threshold of the gallery and there was the audioguide, promising to reduce the risk of potential humiliation from being caught not knowing what to do or what to think.

The guide does not let them down; it offered them the sanctuary of the familiar. Pierre Théberge has pointed out: "Les musées sont en compétition avec les cinémas, les sports, la télévision, le théâtre, les concerts et même les centres d'achats, pour obtenir, maintenir et augmenter leur part du temps que le public consacre à ses loisirs."²³ Introducing contemporary art into the contest for the public's leisure time posed a dilemma, because its disruptive and demanding tendencies run antithetical to popular ideas of a good time. The Museum responded with the audioguide. Unfortunately this tool does not encourage its users to discover and take pleasure in that which distinguished an art viewing experience from its pop-cultural competitors. Instead it erased art's singularity. The question remains, however: do museums want to serve up contemporary art as another product to be consumed, or do they want to show how it can be an alternative to already redundant behavior?

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Notes

I would like to thank Rose-Marie Arbour for her direction and encouragement in the writing of this article.

1 The French-language version of the audioguide seems to have been translated directly from the English, thus most generalizations put forward in this article could apply to either audiotape.

2 These figures were given to me by Elliane Brodard, responsible for audioguides at the M.M.F.A., and Guy Parent, responsible for museum ticket sales. According to Parent attendance for the Goodwin exhibitions was the highest ever experienced for a contemporary art show at the M.M.F.A.

3 Information from an interview with Jill Corner by the author, Montréal, June 6, 1989. Note: all quotes from and references to Corner are taken from this interview.

4 Eric GIBSON, "Talk shows at the Met," *The New Criterion* (November 1987): 80.

5 References to the audioguide text are notated as follows: (page number /L line number).

6 Michael J. PARSONS, *How We Understand Art: A cognitive developmental account of aesthetic experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 92.

7 *Ibid.*, 76.

8 *Ibid.*, 66.

9 GIBSON, "Talk shows," 81.

10 Sophie GIRONNAY, "Goodwin, L'Ecorchée," *La Vie en Rose* (mai 1987).

11 Nicole LABÉE, "Betty Goodwin, un peintre qui témoigne," *Châtelaine* (février 1988): 8.

12 GIRONNAY, "Goodwin."

13 Reesa GREENBERG, "The Acoustic Eye," *Parachute*, no. 45 (1987): 106.

14 PARSONS, *How we Understand Art*, 55.

15 *Ibid.*, 56.

16 GIBSON, "Talk shows," 79-81.

17 GREENBERG, "The Acoustic Eye," 107.

18 LEISS, KLINE and JHALLY, *Social Communication in Advertising: Persons, products and images of well-being* (Scarborough: Nelson Canada, 1988), 249.

19 Douglas WORTS, "Marketing and promotional strategies in the museum world," *Museum Quarterly* (spring 1983), quoted by Nicole PICHETTE in "Pour un musée ouvert: le marketing," *Musées*, 7:1-2 (1984), 37.

20 PICHETTE, "Pour un musée ouvert," 37.

21 I owe this concept to Susan Crean who presented it as part of her study of Canadian-museum education programs in the sixties in her book, *Who's Afraid of Canadian Culture?* (Don Mills, Ont.: General Publishing, 1976).

22 Tom GRETTON, "New Lamps For Old," in *The New Art History*, eds. Reed and Borzello, (London: Camden Press, 1986), 68.

23 Pierre THÉBERGE, "'Blockbusters' ou 'déficitbusters'," *Musées*, 9:2 (1986).

Résumé

UN CAS PARTICULIER DE DÉMOCRATISATION

L'Audioguide au Musée

L'audioguide fait de plus en plus partie intégrante des expositions d'arts visuels. Cet article est né de la curiosité de savoir ce qui se dit aux oreilles des visiteurs, plus ou moins initiés à l'art, alors qu'ils font le tour d'une exposition sous la conduite d'un ruban magnétique. Le sujet d'étude choisi est l'audioguide produit pour l'exposition *Betty Goodwin: œuvres de 1971 à 1987*, au Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, en 1988. Une analyse détaillée du texte du guide soulève des questions quant à ses rapports avec les stratégies de commercialisation du Musée et son rôle de plus en plus important dans la démocratisation de l'art contemporain, celui dont il est question ici.

Les problèmes qui se posent ne sont pas évidents à première vue. Le texte n'est pas, comme on aurait pu le supposer, sentimental ou anecdotique. Il adopte plutôt le caractère d'un essai discursif. Toutefois, malgré ce ton d'une sobriété tout académique, il contribue à renforcer, plutôt qu'à remettre en question, les idées préconçues sur l'art. Il offre peu de moyens d'appréciation de l'art susceptibles d'aider les utilisateurs à se faire leur propre opinion sur l'œuvre de Betty Goodwin.

Parmi les énoncés qu'on retrouve à travers le texte, il y a ceux qui tendent à relier des œuvres entre elles selon des ressemblances thématiques, stylistiques et formelles. Alors que certaines de ces associations paraissent évidentes, la plupart sont insupportables et semblent être le fruit de leur propre logique. Cependant, les inexactitudes sur lesquelles sont fondées ces ressemblances gratuites peuvent aisément être oubliées, perdues dans le flot du discours. Pourtant, le message qui prédomine laisse croire que tout est relié et donne aux non initiés la certitude qu'il y a de la cohérence dans le désordre virtuel des œuvres qui se présentent à leurs yeux.

Un autre type d'affirmations concerne l'interprétation des œuvres. Elles mettent l'accent sur les aspects les plus tragiques de la condition humaine: la mort, la souffrance et autres problèmes de l'existence. Les utilisateurs qui ne partagent pas cette vision hautement émotive de l'art de Goodwin doivent se trouver sérieusement entravés dans leur exploration personnelle de l'œuvre par l'homogénéité des messages présentés. Le texte de l'audioguide dit bien, quelque part, que les œuvres peuvent être sujettes à diverses interprétations, mais ce message est annulé par le ton catégorique de la plupart des explications présentées comme des faits irréfutables.

L'information, les observations techniques, les idées et les concepts présentés dans le guide ne sont jamais développés jusqu'au bout et manquent de clarté. Même les pistes successives d'interprétation ne sont pas expliquées et ne servent qu'à créer une zone nébuleuse autour de l'œuvre de Goodwin. Ces problèmes sont rendus plus aigus encore par le débit schizophrène du texte. Les sujets changent

constamment de phrase en phrase, sans laisser le temps nécessaire pour évaluer ou même comprendre ce qui vient d'être dit.

Suivant une perspective globale, cependant, ces déficiences pourraient être considérées comme un avantage pour les utilisateurs aussi bien que pour le Musée. Il est courant, pour les novices, de craindre d'être placés dans la situation humiliante de ne pas savoir quel comportement adopter dans ce contexte social nouveau pour eux d'une exposition d'oeuvres d'art. Il leur arrive aussi d'éprouver de l'appréhension à l'idée d'être mis en présence d'une oeuvre à laquelle ils n'arriveraient pas à trouver de signification alors qu'elle devrait pourtant en avoir. L'audioguide est un moyen efficace de les protéger d'un milieu qui leur est étranger en les tenant occupés par un flot de paroles, en leur disant où aller et en déterminant la durée de leur visite. De plus, il leur dit continuellement ce qu'ils doivent penser et ressentir, les plaçant ainsi dans la situation familière, et par conséquent réconfortante, de consommateurs passifs.

Cependant, le guide fait plus que simplement transformer la visite en expérience divertissante. Il offre aux utilisateurs l'illusion d'avoir accès à l'interprétation «officielle» de l'art de Betty Goodwin. Ainsi, sans autre effort que d'avoir à payer la location d'un appareil, ils acquièrent un statut supérieur à celui des non initiés qui font le tour de l'exposition sans guide. Quant au Musée, il semble profiter encore davantage des faiblesses de l'audioguide. Parce que les utilisateurs ont peu de moyens de développer une appréciation personnelle de l'art contemporain, ils deviennent dépendants de l'audioguide pour apprécier et comprendre les expositions futures. À une époque de coupures dans les dépenses publiques, la location d'audioguides non seulement apporte des revenus, mais provoque des répercussions encore plus grandes comme instrument de commercialisation. Elle offre aux utilisateurs plaisir, confort et prestige, accroissant ainsi les chances d'en faire des visiteurs réguliers et d'amener leurs amis au Musée. Cette forme de développement du public visiteur entraîne un accroissement du nombre et de la diversité des personnes exposées à l'art, résulte en un potentiel accru de mécénat corporatif, justifie l'utilisation des deniers publics par le Musée et génère d'autres revenus provenant de la vente de billets, à l'entrée, et de souvenirs, à la boutique. Ainsi, les utilisateurs d'audioguides représentent un nouveau marché à exploiter, une nouvelle classe de bienfaiteurs.

Le beau côté de l'affaire, c'est que tout se passe sans que soit modifiée la hiérarchie traditionnelle de l'«establishment» artistique. Les masses populaires ont été amenées à découvrir l'oeuvre de Betty Goodwin, mais il est clair que seuls les experts ont conservé le privilège de lui donner une signification. On peut se demander si le Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, tout comme d'autres musées et galeries publiques, désire simplement tirer parti des tendances passives d'une société de consommation pour élargir son public, ou bien s'il veut démontrer que l'art peut être une alternative à un comportement redondant.

Traduction: Élise Bonnette