

JEAN PAUL RIOPELLE



fig. 1 Jean-Paul Riopelle, *Catalogue raisonné, 1939-1953, Tome I*,
Montréal, Hibou Éditeurs, 1999

SOME ACTIVITIES AND PUBLICATIONS AROUND THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF *REFUS GLOBAL*

August 1998 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Refus global*, the manifesto of a group of sixteen painters, dancers, writers, photographers and designers from Montréal who were called the Automatists, and who are now considered major figures in the history of Canadian modernism. The anniversary sparked a great deal of interest in Québec and a burst of activity on the part of cultural agencies, galleries, writers and publishers to plan events and bring out books on or near the date. A major federal stimulus was the issue of a set of commemorative stamps reproducing works by Automatist painters Marcel Barbeau, Paul-Émile Borduas, Marcelle Ferron, Pierre Gauvreau, Fernand Leduc, Jean-Paul Mousseau and Jean-Paul Riopelle. This commemoration prompted exhibitions in Hull at the Musée de la poste, as well as in Paris (Centre culturel canadien), London (Canada House) and Washington (Canadian Embassy). The occasion was also acknowledged by a colour spread in the *Toronto Star*.¹ In fact, so much happened over the year that it is difficult to mention everything, or even bring much order to the list, and the following account does not pretend to be complete. In fact, this article began as a review of the first volume of the *catalogue raisonné* of Jean-Paul Riopelle (fig.1) and grew from there into a more general discussion of other events and publications celebrating the movement and its anniversary.

Although bibliographical details concerning the Riopelle *catalogue raisonné*² are given in French, most of the texts in the book are translated into English, with the significant exception of Yseult Riopelle's dedicatory letter to her father,³ and a poem by Sylvie Riopelle, her sister, written in 1983 which begins (my translation): "So, who are you, my father/ when your brush gets tired of tracing rowdy owls/ on canvas..." There seems to be a bitter-sweet drama going on behind this project, which may explain such statements as the following from Yseult Riopelle's "Foreword": "It is unfortunate that we were not allowed access to certain archives that would have enabled us to include pertinent information in this reference work, whose sole purpose is to certify the authenticity of the entire body of Jean-Paul Riopelle's work" (146, 148);⁴ and "It is truly a pity that our inability to gain access to some works prevented us from presenting more, pertinent, high-quality photographs" (147, 150). In fact, I wish she had given more specific

information about the archives she was able, and not able, to access and indeed more information about her own archives, which are often mentioned in Monique Brunet-Weinmann's article in the publication (see below).

This was an ambitious and difficult project. Riopelle is a prolific painter, anything but careful about his records and notorious for not wanting to talk about his work, especially to researchers. As his daughter explains, there were no studio records prior to 1985 and she has worked for fifteen years tracing the early paintings. The first fruit of her efforts is this volume which includes Riopelle's production up to 1953, divided into three genres: oils, works on paper in various media, and sculptures. Seven other volumes are projected which will take us up to 1992. There will also be a supplementary volume devoted to prints. This first volume is organized so that the chronological *catalogue raisonné* actually comes near the end, preceded by the major critical texts and by more than a hundred pages of colour reproductions and photographs. The actual catalogue of works is followed by an illustrated chronology of exhibitions (1943 to 1998), a very useful and attractive part of the book. It is not clear if this last part will be repeated in each volume (otherwise, why not just cover up to 1953?) but it should be.⁵

In the publicity package that came with my copy a one-page note, presumably written by Yseult Riopelle, gives the nature and purpose of a *catalogue raisonné* and explains that such books exist for a number of contemporary artists. She also points out that while hundreds are produced in the United States, less than a handful have been produced in Canada (in fact there is only one other, on David Milne) and insists that this publication is an essential first step towards protecting and diffusing her father's work.⁶ Who would argue with any of that? And may her efforts encourage more of the same. She explains that this will also be a traditional art book, giving quality reproductions of Riopelle's works since there are few publications that do him justice at the moment. In fact, few if any Canadian artists have had as many handsome art books published on them, inside and outside Canada.⁷ But that's no reason not to welcome more, especially one that gives the Québec context its due. Eight volumes of this quality would indeed be a monument to Riopelle, an audacious answer to tomes on Picasso, Miro and others. It will take enormous nerve and a great deal of financial backing, as the list of corporate sponsors shows.

This is a sumptuous, large, boxed, profusely illustrated book. Not only is the quality of reproduction good compared even to some excellent catalogues I have at hand, but there has been thought put into one of the inevitable problems of bilingual publications: when you have a text repeated in two languages, each demanding juxtaposed illustrations, how do you avoid cheating one language or repeating illustrations? Here, as the French text is illustrated with works by Sam Francis, Joan Mitchell, Shitao, Riopelle, Borduas, Ozias Leduc and others, so is the English text, but with different, comparable works by the same artists placed in equivalent spots in relation to the text. Thus the English reader gets the same

benefit, but without repetition — a true courtesy to all readers, unilingual or not.⁸ And, as mentioned already, the “Chronologie des expositions” with its reproductions of catalogue covers and pages from magazines or newspapers, its photographs of Riopelle and friends at different times, its reproductions of works from all periods over fifty years, gives a fascinating and useful overview that complements the chronologically-limited *catalogue raisonné*. But there is a tension between the stated scholarly purpose of a *catalogue raisonné* and the desire to appeal to a luxury art-book market, and this seems to be reflected in decisions made concerning the large colour section.

Yseult Riopelle explains that “the reproductions are presented according to the aesthetic criteria of the work itself as well as to ensure a well-balanced harmony. They are in no way presented chronologically.... As a general rule, the works reproduced on pages 153 to 360 were chosen because of the quality of photographic documentation available and not according to the works themselves” (150). The result is a section that is not organized chronologically, thematically or generically according to the artist’s materials or techniques, nor even according to the critic’s taste — at least in any way that I can see. There may be clusters of works, for example, which give some sense of a continuum, but they will be preceded and followed by others from a different time in a different medium. True enough, going through the chronological catalogue, one is referred back to pieces reproduced in larger format in the colour section, but the colour section’s lack of order and information is disorienting. Maybe it was decided that any kind of traditional organization would be boring and that the works should stand on their own without necessarily being arranged for the reader’s benefit. On page 196 for example, we see a reproduction of a well-known 1941 figurative painting of an owl, while on the facing page there is the much-exhibited *Robe of Stars*. This oil from 1952 was painted when Riopelle was texturing his brilliant colours with small strokes of the palette knife and also dragging lines through the surface, a fine example of his exuberant “all-over” or “all-out” abstraction.⁹ The juxtaposition of these two works is striking but not instructive because it has no coherent context.

In the colour section each reproduction is given a precise annotation including date, medium and catalogue number which sends us to the chronological list for more details. Fair enough, but this means that even if we want to come to the paintings non-contextually, as we are apparently encouraged to do, we still have to flip to the back of the book for such basic information as title and dimensions, which I would have liked more easily available for my first “reading” of these pictures. In general it would have been preferable to have a colour section that echoed the *catalogue raisonné* in its organization, so that one could see the development of techniques and motifs over time. Some of the photographs of Riopelle and friends have titles and credits at their margins but for others, such as the one on p.175 in the colour section, we must turn to the second-last page of the book to consult the

list of names of photographers and copyright holders. Matching name to photograph is not an easy task because specific page references are given for only two shots. No other information as to date, place or circumstances is hazarded. And who is responsible for the wonderfully evocative photographs of Riopelle's 1948 clay sculptures (now lost) set in snow? Is it Maurice Perron? Is it Riopelle himself? I can find no indication, not even a "photographer unknown."¹⁰

Looking at the texts preceding the major illustrations, we can see that this book is intended for, and expected to reach, a broad audience, not only in Canada but in the United States and France as well. The choice of Michel Waldberg as one of the major commentators is very astute from that point of view. He is the son of Patrick Waldberg, the American critic and writer who became associated with Breton and the Surrealists, first in New York during the war and later in Paris, at least until the internal wars of the Surrealists turned him off. Patrick Waldberg's writings on Riopelle were crucial to the painter's career and the Waldberg name is still prestigious in art circles on both sides of the Atlantic. Michel Waldberg lived through this history as a boy, later studied in France and works there now, publishing extensively as a poet, novelist and essayist. He has known and admired Riopelle's painting from childhood. But he protests too much, in my opinion, when he argues that "Riopelle's painting is not directly part of any affiliation but seems rather to surge, like Athena fully armed, straight out of Jupiter's head, brandishing thunder and lightning" (32, 50). Waldberg has a true talent for drawing together relevant comments from a variety of sources including Riopelle, Breton, Masson, Jarry, Artaud, Shitao and others, linking automatism, shamanism and Zen in order to explain both the dynamism and the control of Riopelle's work, as well as its relationship to nature. This is criticism in the great, French belletristic tradition where page references, places and dates of publication, translators' names¹¹ and the like are details that are not supposed to matter.¹²

I must say that I much prefer the work of Monique Brunet-Weinmann¹³ who concentrates on Riopelle and the period in question, giving us the benefit of her research on painter Louise Gadbois and critic/teacher Father Marie-Alain Couturier to help fill out the context of Riopelle's years as a student in Montréal, where the whole question of modernism and abstraction in painting was being debated in the years and months before the consolidation of the Automatist group. She also has useful and new (at least to me) information on Riopelle and the Lespérance family, with whom he spent a great deal of time and who encouraged him much more than his own family. He eventually married Françoise Lespérance, a story that is well told here. I would thank Brunet-Weinmann even if she had done nothing more than protest the spread of the "false and simplistic view of Riopelle as hunter-fisherman-drinker, an uncultured being of nature" (88,132). Unfortunately two of her co-authors, François Odermatt and Michel Waldberg, continue to perpetuate the myth (14, 15; 24, 42).

My own research, however, makes me wonder about some details in Brunet-Weinmann's account of the activities of the Automatist movement in the forties. I would suggest, for example, that readers might consult such books as François-Marc Gagnon's chronicle of the Automatist movement¹⁴ (fig.2), or Patricia Smart's study of the women signatories of the Automatist manifesto¹⁵ (fig.3) for a more accurate account of the history of Françoise Sullivan and Louise Renaud in New York. And I am surprised to see claims still being made about Riopelle's contributions to the actual composition of everything from the Surrealist manifesto *Rupture inaugurale* (82, 126), to "Commentaires sur des mots courants," one of the Borduas texts published in *Refus global* (83, 124), to open letters published in newspapers concerning *Refus global* (86, 129), letters I'm quite certain were penned by Pierre Gauvreau. This is not to deny in any way the great importance of Riopelle's Paris experiences for the Montréal group and the impact of his energy on the publication of *Refus global*. It must be acknowledged that his cover design for the manifesto has become, in effect, the visual emblem of the movement and is echoed in dozens of publications.¹⁶ But the emphasis on his written contribution seems to be contradicted by some quite conclusive manuscript evidence.¹⁷ Is this another version of the old, lamentable rivalry between Riopelle and "maître Borduas,"¹⁸ stimulated by the amount of attention that has been given in Québec recently to Borduas' writings?¹⁹ In any case there are other aspects of Brunet-Weinmann's article that I find particularly pleasing: the way she shows what is useful, and not, in Georges Mathieu's history of abstraction in Paris, *De la révolte à la renaissance*; the linkages she makes between the titles of Riopelle's paintings and the famous *aparté* between Elisa Breton, André Breton and Benjamin Péret at the time of the exhibition of Riopelle's paintings at Nina Dausset's gallery in Paris, in 1947, a text later printed in the new edition of Breton's *Le surréalisme et la peinture*; and her account of the early fifties in Paris when everything was in flux, critics and painters trying to define what was essential compared to work being done in New York and Montréal.

Looked at in its entirety, and looking forward to future volumes, this book shows the need for some rethinking of the presentation of the colour section and some work on inaccuracies and awkwardness in the English translation. However, it is just the beginning of a huge work in progress (Riopelle has apparently dubbed it a "catalogue déraisonné"), a courageous and generous undertaking, and I look forward to the next volumes.

As for other activities generated by the anniversary of the publication of *Refus global*, we might start with what could have been the major event of the year: the exhibition at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal entitled *Borduas et l'épopée automatiste*. Unfortunately, it turned out to be anything but an epic adventure. It was based entirely on the museum's collection, heavily weighted towards Borduas with little or no attempt to seek works outside.²⁰ Certain artists such as Marcelle



fig.2
François-Marc
Gagnon, *Chronique
du mouvement
automatiste québé-
cois, 1941-1954*,
Montréal, Lanctôt
Éditeur, 1998



fig.3
Patricia Smart, *Les
femmes du REFUS
GLOBAL*, Montréal,
Éditions du Boréal,
1998

Ferron and Jean-Paul Mousseau were badly represented. There was an entire room documenting the restoration of cracking paint on some Borduas canvases, but there was not a single work, early or late, by Françoise Sullivan — only Maurice Perron's famous photos of her dance in snow. In the past, interest in the manifesto and the movement has tended to centre upon Borduas (so much so that the first English translations of *Refus global* only included Borduas' texts and ignored the other three contributors, whose work amounted to more than half the total volume). However, the Musée does not seem to realize that there is a strong movement among historians to change the focus and give more prominence to other signatories. This reality was not lost on the Montréal newspaper *Le Devoir*, which published a spread of 24 full pages, with articles by a variety of academics and journalists. They discussed the phenomenon from a variety of angles with at least some recognition of everyone involved, along with plenty of illustrations, including a previously unpublished work done in coloured ink by Riopelle in 1948.²¹ Nor was it lost on the cultural review *Spirale*, whose "Dossier" section gave a multi-disciplinary and contextual account of the impact of the Automatist manifesto and the anniversary events surrounding it.²²

The Musée d'art de Mont-Saint-Hilaire, the village that was home to Borduas for many years, mounted an exhibition in the summer of 1997 entitled *Saint-Hilaire et les automatistes*. Its well-produced, small catalogue included a few colour illustrations of paintings, some "new" archival photographs of Borduas and family, and essentially biographico-geographical essays by Gilles Lapointe and François-Marc Gagnon (fig. 4). The exhibition showed not only retrospective works but recent creations, including works by Janine Carreau (herself younger than the manifesto) inspired by the automatist poet Claude Gauvreau. In May of 1998, a second exhibition, *Éternel présent — 50 ans après Refus global* again presented large, up-to-the-minute works and a luxury catalogue. In addition to these events in Saint-Hilaire, were exhibitions devoted to individual artists (a kind of compensation for the limited coverage of the national and provincial galleries). Most, if not all, of the painters of the group had an individual show somewhere during this anniversary year.²³

In December of 1998 the Musée du Québec opened an important exhibition of the photographs of Maurice Perron, another signatory of the manifesto. His pictures of the group and their works from the early forties became the image-bank of Automatism and were constantly exploited by art historians and museums who often didn't credit him. More recently he has received his due, not only for the value of his extensive documentation (the Musée du Québec has some of his archives) but for the quality of his photography. His work is now being discussed along with the painters and paintings he depicts.²⁴ The catalogue produced for this exhibition, *Maurice Perron photographies* (fig. 5), includes large reproductions of more than 100 striking pictures, among them of course the "classics," but also many that



fig.4
Gilles Lapointe
and François-Marc
Gagnon, *Saint-Hilaire
et les automatistes*,
Mont-Saint-Hilaire,
Musée d'art de Mont-
Saint-Hilaire, 1997

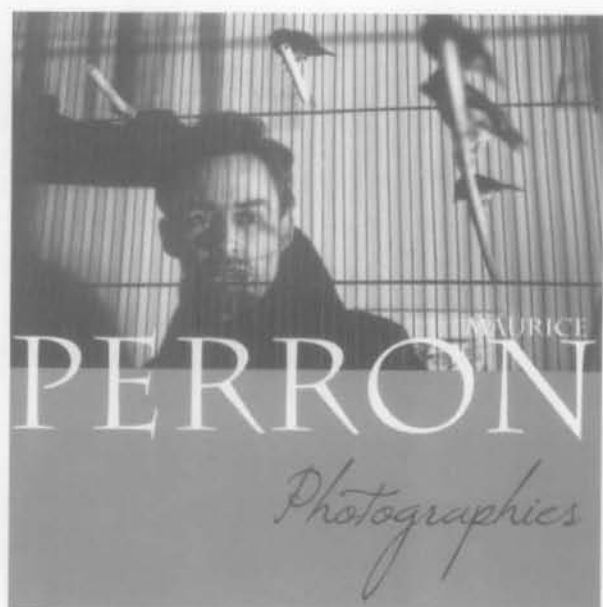


fig.5
Maurice Perron,
Photographies,
Québec, Musée du
Québec, 1998

have not been in circulation before, at least not to my knowledge. There was also published in 1998 a collection of about fifty photographs by Paul-Émile Borduas, who is not known as a photographer and was apparently not proud of this work since he didn't talk about it or about photography, even with Maurice Perron. The photographs were taken as part of a 1938 documentation, sponsored by the Québec government, of life in the Gaspé. In his introduction Gilles Lapointe situates this assignment in the debates over modernism and cultural conservation going on at the École du meuble, where Borduas worked at the time. Lapointe does not argue for the great aesthetic value of the images (there are about 800 in total) but remarks on the qualities of detachment in the landscapes, the relative lack of human subjects and the emphasis on contrasts of light and dark. He also argues that almost immediately after the summer of 1938 Borduas seems to have turned his back on the sentimental celebration of rural Québec, looking instead towards international art and Surrealism.²⁵

An astonishing production was held at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in Montréal from September 15 to October 10, 1998. This was the highly successful run of Claude Gauvreau's play, *Les Oranges sont vertes*, which is in part a fictionalization of his relationship with the Automatist group. There were also lecture series and round-table discussions, mostly in Montréal and Ottawa, as well as academic conferences and events. Notable were a conference in Montréal whose acts were published as *L'automatisme en mouvement* (mentioned above) and a conference entitled *Les automatistes à Paris*²⁶ that coincided with a retrospective exhibition of paintings and documents at the Centre culturel canadien in Paris.²⁷ The former included a cross-disciplinary set of papers by many of the best-known experts on the movement, as well as a number of previously unpublished, very useful documents, particularly letters, by signatories of *Refus global*. The latter included a paper by José Pierre, a well-known French critic, giving the Surrealist position against automatism used for non-figurative painting, and a well-documented, fascinating account by Ninon Gauthier of the difficulties which French impresario Charles Delloye faced when trying to mount exhibitions in Europe of Borduas and the Automatists. Most of that trouble came from Robert Élie, sometime friend of Borduas, who often acted on behalf of the painter's widow. There were also some useful reprints of historical documents published with the acts of the Paris conference. The exhibition itself, organized and with texts by François-Marc Gagnon and René Viau, concentrated on paintings from the late forties with some controversial attention shown to Roger Fauteux, who only exhibited in the first Automatist shows, never signed the manifesto, and is reported to have publicly turned his back on the movement.²⁸

Not surprisingly, with all this celebration of Automatism going on in Montréal there were signs of reaction. The most fun was a little pamphlet with illustrations of artworks, entitled *Cent cibles*, published by art students at the

Université du Québec à Montréal on August 9, 1998 and inviting people to come to their fiftieth anniversary in 2048. In large part a parody of the Automatist manifesto, it contains a section of definitions from Z to A, including this of *Refus global*: "Nausée authentique. Indigestion mentale entraînant un rejet total de la nourriture psychique contrôlée." More serious was twenty hours of radio broadcasts (May 4-29) entitled *Du Refus global au village global*, produced by the journalist Jean-Pierre Denis and including archival materials and extensive interviews. By the end of the series one could detect a strong inclination to question the originality and reputation of the movement, using "authorities" whose credentials were themselves questionable. Nonetheless, much of the extensive documentation was fascinating. Also fascinating was a revitalization of the old Montréal/Québec, non-figurative/figurative artistic rivalry through the publication of a charge by Québec historian Philippe Dubé. He contended that the Montréal celebrations were an occultation that had neglected to mention the context of *Refus global*, especially the contribution of Alfred Pellan and the manifesto *Prisme d'yeux*.²⁹ This was answered by Ginette Michaud and Gilles Lapointe, deploring such revisionism and arguing that *Prisme d'yeux* could not in any way be seen as equivalent to *Refus global*.³⁰ Can you imagine *The Globe and Mail* giving the equivalent to a full page of space to such a debate?

But by far the most stir was caused by a film entitled *Les enfants du Refus global*, made through the Office National du Film in time for release and extensive screening in the summer of 1998. It was made by Manon Barbeau, daughter of Marcel Barbeau. This was not only a well-made documentary but a courageous attempt at understanding parents who, on the one hand, were associated with a movement that signified self-determination and freedom, and on the other hand left their children to be raised by relatives. The film also traced the impact of the manifesto on the children of Borduas and others, including Riopelle. Some of the signatories and their children resented the film and said so in print. What was distressing for me as a reader (and for the maker, I believe) was that the film was used by certain journalists as an excuse for gratuitous and simple-minded Automatist-bashing.³¹ My own reaction is ambiguous: sympathetic to the filmmaker's quest yet haunted by the cruel eye of the camera relentlessly trained on a very frail Riopelle. Turning his head from side to side like a caged bear, Riopelle expressed what I considered a very honest cynicism about his life and work — a scene that journalists later interpreted as proof of the futility and self-absorption of all "revolution."³²

There was also, in 2000, a major retrospective on Marcelle Ferron at the Musée d'art contemporain,³³ reviewed in the usual pretentious and condescending *Globe and Mail* manner by Blake Gopnik who complains that the exhibition includes too many paintings.³⁴ In the near future, there will be a large exhibition on Françoise Sullivan at the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal — about time, and I hope there will be too many paintings in that show as well.

Besides exhibitions and catalogues there were also a number of other publications that deserve mention, beginning with a title that might surprise in this context: *Breaking Chains*, a two-volume tribute to the late Bruno Cormier, who was an internationally-known forensic psychiatrist. Cormier was a signatory of *Refus global*, author of the text "L'œuvre d'art est une expérience" in the manifesto and an important collector of works by his Automatist friends. As Pierre Gauvreau points out in his tribute (which is also a vivid portrait of Montréal in the thirties), "Many Canadian museums can show [early Automatist] works today only because Ruby and Bruno Cormier had the foresight to collect them when they were being rejected by connoisseurs intimidated by public ridicule, and while the art institutions refused to hear anything about them."³⁵

It cannot be stressed enough how much Borduas emphasized in the manifesto that Automatism refused to be confined to the straight-jacket of the plastic arts alone. A living example is Pierre Gauvreau, whose early career as a painter was slowed by a two-year Canadian Army posting to England (his brother had to arrange to have his works shown in the earliest Automatist shows). He returned to become one of the most articulate and newsworthy members of the group before and after the publication of *Refus global*, and from the mid-fifties had a highly successful career in radio, film and television. The title of a book-length series of interviews with Gauvreau published by Michel Désautels,³⁶ echoes the title of Gauvreau's hugely popular historical *téléroman*, *Le temps d'une paix* and it gives a summary of both the broadcasting and painting careers, including stills from television programmes as well as colour illustrations of paintings. Gauvreau has a historian's sense of Québec in the first half of the twentieth century, and he is therefore one of the most informed and reliable witnesses to the history of Automatism as well as to the formative years of television in Québec. He is also a fine and prolific painter, undervalued by art historians perhaps because he has not been absolutely faithful to the discipline, with his parallel, distinguished career in radio and television, much as Françoise Sullivan has tended to be ignored because she had the temerity to be, as well as a sculptor and painter, one of the foremost performers and choreographers in the history of Canadian dance.

This leads me back to Patricia Smart's *Les femmes du Refus global* mentioned earlier. Her book begins with the observation that seven of the fifteen signatories of the manifesto were women, most of them now distinguished in their fields of visual arts, dance, literature and design. Nonetheless they have received much less study than their male counterparts. One of Smart's first tasks, therefore, is simply to introduce her subjects, but she does so by placing them in the historical context of the Duplessis years. She begins her excellent second chapter, "Des trous de lumière dans La Grande Noirceur: les années automatistes," with a quotation from a poem by Saint-Denis Garneau, "Spectacle de la danse," a lament for children who dance badly because of the lack of air in a confined space. Three of the women of

the Automatist movement were dancers (Françoise Sullivan, Jeanne Renaud, and Françoise Riopelle) and Patricia Smart brings everything around to Sullivan's magnificent free-form dance, *Dédale* (1948), to make an analogy between the liberation expressed by Automatism and the freedom of the dancing body. She devotes a chapter to each of the women signatories, with illustrations of the artworks of Sullivan and Marcelle Ferron. She also makes the point that although the Automatist movement may have been the best game in town for the women concerned, it was not entirely free of sexism. This is the basis for her original and fascinating study on Muriel Guilbault, a highly-respected actress who committed suicide in 1952. Guilbault has been remembered mainly as the muse of Claude Gauvreau and the centrepiece in his novel *Beauté baroque* as well as a figure in a number of his major plays. Smart sees her as emblematic of many women of the time and place who desired the liberty called for in *Refus global* but were broken by stereotypes imposed not only by their society and their lovers, but even by themselves. The other side of the coin, was, of course, the ebullient, resilient, globe-trotting Marcelle Ferron.³⁷

I have already mentioned the three-volume *Écrits* of Borduas as an example of the serious scholarly study that he has received in Québec. If Riopelle has the greatest international reputation among Canadian painters, there is no doubt that Borduas has enormous stature in Québec and in Canada as a whole, firmly based on his role as mentor and writer. Gilles Lapointe was in the first team that began working on Borduas' writings some twenty years ago and there is no one, apart from François-Marc Gagnon, who has written so much and so widely on Borduas and the Automatists. Lapointe is co-editor of Borduas' correspondence,³⁸ but has also written a study of Borduas as letter-writer.³⁹ *L'envol des signes* evokes the famous painting by Borduas and its title raises questions of visual (conventional signs taking flight in the move toward non-figuration) and verbal semiotics (pun on "signes" and "cygnes"). Lapointe's book not only analyzes the complexity of the personal letter as a genre but examines the connection between Borduas' visual and verbal expression. Lapointe argues that despite his reputation as an awkward writer, which he himself fuelled, Borduas was very conscious that his letters were an equally important expression of himself that he could use to examine, and exalt, his painting. He expected them to be published and in fact cultivated his literary image.

Two major sets of correspondence are at the centre of Lapointe's study: one with the Christian writer and critic Robert Élie, an early friend from whom Borduas became estranged after the publication of *Refus global*, and Claude Gauvreau, the young poet who became, some say, the spirit of Automatism in the fifties. Lapointe is now preparing an edition of the letters between Borduas and Gauvreau and, to my taste, this section of *L'envol des signes* is much richer in what it says about the correspondents. But the chapter on Robert Élie has a particular

interest because of the light it sheds on Élie's role in the aftermath of the manifesto when many of Borduas' friends and contemporaries deserted him. Knowing that Élie was a friend of Borduas, and even produced a book on him, it is difficult to understand why he published the long and unctuously critical essay "Au dela du refus" in the *Revue Dominicaine* in 1949. Lapointe's research suggests that the essay was part of an effort, also involving Borduas' wife, to discredit the manifesto. This agrees with recent findings by Ninon Gauthier (see above) suggesting that Élie was not cooperative in efforts to disseminate Borduas' work. But as a study of Borduas as visual and verbal communicator, this book goes far beyond such tales of chicanery.

One could not go far in any discussion of the Automatist movement without citing François-Marc Gagnon's new *Chronique du mouvement automatiste québécois, 1941-1954*, published in 1998. Focussing on a limited period of time, this book gives far more detailed information than we have had to date. A number of articles and letters which it has hitherto been difficult or impossible to find are published in their entirety. This will no doubt be the standard reference for years to come even though, as must be expected in a project of this size, certain details and judgements might be questioned. It is most definitely the book of an art historian, full of important information about exhibitions, works shown, responses in the press, etc. There is nothing wrong with this, except that the Automatist movement involved more than the visual arts and although Gagnon makes a noble effort to be eclectic, his art-historical penchants certainly predominate. For example, he seems interested in bringing back into memory some of the painters such as Roger Fauteux and Charles Daudelin who were minor figures in the early history of the movement. The problem is that they seem to take on more importance in Gagnon's book than such people as the poet Gilles Hénault, who was a fellow-traveller, critic and, later a museum curator responsible for organizing major exhibitions of Automatist painters. Most striking, however, is the comparatively sparse coverage given to the women signatories of *Refus global*, and it cannot be just because most of them were not visual artists. There are only two passing references to Marcelle Ferron in the last 100 pages of the book. For some reason, Gagnon, having explained that she left Montréal for Paris in 1953 and was about to become interested in "la peinture sur verre" (could he be referring to her magnificent, large, public stained glass works?) decides that Ferron's career in Paris is less directly relevant to a history of Québec Automatism than what had gone before (867). The same reasoning is not applied to Riopelle and Borduas whose activities in Paris and New York are extensively documented.

In fact, Gagnon's focus on Automatism gets fuzzy on several occasions. For example, there is a long section (858-864) on the French press reaction to Jackson Pollock. By the same token Gagnon's accounts of the 1953 *Young European Painters* exhibition in New York (867-877), or the Venice Biennale of 1954 (929-944),

tend to devote more time to the events themselves and to other artists involved than to Riopelle and Borduas. Indeed, the specific subject of Automatism makes so many slow fades that one wonders if Gagnon is not chafing a little, wanting to broaden his perspective. But there is a great deal to be learned from this book. The long section on Riopelle in New York had much new information for me and Gagnon's analysis of Riopelle's withdrawal from Surrealism is very interesting, as is the specific information on Riopelle's connections with various "surrealizing" groups and magazines such as *Rixes* and *Phases*. Gagnon also gives the most detailed account I have seen of Fernand Leduc's interest in Raymond Abellio, the first sign of Leduc's turning away from the philosophy of *Refus global*. Besides telling us about the Automatist movement this book, solidly grounded as it is in newspaper articles, gives us a vivid portrait of the age.

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Notes

- 1 Judy STOFFMAN, "The Stamp of Approval," *Toronto Star*, 25 July 1998.
- 2 Jean-Paul RIOPELLE, *Catalogue raisonné, 1939-1953*, Tome I (Montréal: Hibou Éditeurs, 1999), 462 p. Recherche et direction, Yseult Riopelle; Conception graphique et production, René Detroye; Coordination, François Odermatt; Textes, Michel Waldborg et Monique Brunet Weinmann.
- 3 It concerns a newspaper clipping from 1951, telling (with Riopelle's sardonic comments) how two of his paintings blew off the roof of a cab and were lost in the Seine. In this project, Yseult Riopelle is somewhat like the divers trying to find her father's lost paintings.
- 4 I will quote from the English translations of the texts, but give page references to both the French and English texts, in that order.
- 5 Yseult Riopelle is considering changing the photographs in future printings of this chronology.
- 6 A case in point which touches me personally. In my own book on the Automatist movement I included a reproduction of a gouache attributed to Riopelle, dated 1947, which I had seen in publications of the Dresdnere Gallery in Toronto. Yseult Riopelle did not include this work in her *catalogue raisonné*. When I asked why, she explained that some close friends of Riopelle had expressed doubts about the authenticity of the work, and she had sufficient reservations based on her research to convince her not to include it. However, the case is certainly not closed and more information may come to light.

- 7 The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts catalogue for the November 1991 exhibition was hardly shabby, nor were the Maeght publications in the sixties, such as the luxury catalogue/magazine *Derrière le miroir* 171 (avril 1968) which featured Riopelle lithographs — to cite just two examples.
- 8 A caveat: the illustration (p.27) of Shitao's *Listening to the Gurgling of Streams* is turned on its side.
- 9 Of course the labels "abstraction," "non-figuration," etc. are debated by Riopelle and others in the texts printed here. Monique Brunet-Weinmann uses the term "all-our" in distinguishing Riopelle's approach from Jackson Pollock's (91, 134).
- 10 I learned from a later conversation with Yseult Riopelle that these magical photographs are by her father, but that information should have been readily available.
- 11 Waldberg quotes Goethe's *Maximes et réflexions* as if they sprang from the author's head fully clothed in French, with no need for a translator or even a publisher (see p.37, note 50). The translator(s) of this *catalogue raisonné* are content to render the title in English and leave it at that (p.54, note 50).
- 12 Another caveat: on p. 43, there is a scrambled passage ("His manner...particular thing") that does not appear in Waldberg's original text.
- 13 Monique Brunet-Weinmann was also born in France, but has resided in Canada since 1969. She is a teacher, art critic and commentator, and the author of a number of publications on Gadbois, Riopelle and others.
- 14 François-Marc GAGNON, *Chronique du mouvement automatiste québécois, 1941-1954* (Montréal: Lanctôt Éditeur, 1998).
- 15 Patricia SMART, *Les femmes du Refus global* (Montréal: Éditions du Boréal, 1998). This book also contains information on Françoise Lespérance-Riopelle, a major figure in avant-garde dance in Canada. See also Iro TEMBECK, *Danser à Montréal* (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1991), 105-127, and Ray ELLENWOOD, *Egregore, A History of the Montréal Automatist Movement* (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1992), 307-10.
- 16 In fact, a fascinating article could be written about the covers that Riopelle designed, not only for *Refus global*, but for books by Artaud and others. Some of these are now in the collection of the National Gallery of Canada.
- 17 It is true that the description "document collectif," may be applied to many of these texts as Brunet-Weinmann suggests concerning "Commentaires sur des mots courants" (80). There was considerable discussion within the group and in articles published by various members. But we have quite convincing evidence as to who was primarily responsible for the actual writing.
- 18 See Gilles LAPOINTE, "Filiations et ruptures au sein de l'automatisme: la correspondance Borduas-Riopelle," *L'automatisme en mouvement*, special number of *Études françaises* 34, nos.2/3 (automne-hiver 1998): 193-216.
- 19 See, for example, the handsome and heavily annotated three-volume *Écrits*, ed. André-G. BOURASSA, Jean FISETTE and Gilles LAPOINTE (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1987 to 1997).
- 20 Apparently the original intention was to show Borduas alone, a decision changed at the last minute following protests by Guido Molinari.
- 21 "Les 50 ans de *Refus global*," *Le Devoir*, 9-10 mai.
- 22 "Dossier," *Spirale* 165 (mars-avril 1999): 8-17.
- 23 Two that I was able to visit were *Éclatement de rouge*, a show of Françoise Sullivan's recent, astonishing red monochromes at the gallery of the Université du Québec à Montréal, and in

September a very good chronological view of Pierre Gauvreau's work at the Galerie Jean-Claude Bergeron in Ottawa. An exhibition of works on paper by Fernand Leduc took place in March and April at the D&E Lake Gallery in Toronto, while Marcel Barbeau had a fall exhibition entitled *Mastering the Accidental* at the Churchill College Art Gallery in Cambridge, England.

24 Maurice Perron died on 27 February 1999.

25 Gilles LAPOINTE, *Paul-Émile Borduas, photographe* (Montréal: Les Éditions Fides, 1998).

26 *Les automatistes à Paris*, ed. Lise GAUVIN (Montréal: Les 400 coups, 2000).

27 *Refus global (1948): le manifeste du mouvement automatiste; Manifesto of the Automatist Movement* (Paris: Services culturels de l'Ambassade du Canada, 1998).

28 For an account of this conference-exhibition, and of a conference-exhibition-performance event held at York University in November 1998, see Gilles LAPOINTE, "Refus global hors les murs," in *Spirale* (see n.22).

29 "Quand le culte occulte," *Le Devoir*, 8 juillet 1998. Dubé and colleagues are preparing a book on the expatriate figurative-painter Marcel Baril.

30 "Refus global: occultation ou révision?" *Le Devoir*, 18-19 juillet 1998.

31 Here are some of the articles: Natalie PETROWSKI, "Chacun son Refus," *La Presse*, 11 mars 1998; Lise BISSONNETTE, "Un acte de liberté," *Le Devoir*, 14-15 mars 1998; Jeanne RENAUD, "Certains enfants du Refus Global," *Le Devoir*, 15 mars 1998; Odile TREMBLAY, "Déboulonner les statues," *Le Devoir*, 16 mars 1998; Agnès GRUDA, "Le malentendu global," *La Presse*, 20 mars 1998; Babalou HAMELIN, Diane HAMELIN, Danielle LEMEUNIER (daughters of Marcelle Ferron), "Des enfants du Refus Global répondent," *Voir* 578 (26 mars-1 avril 1998): 7. See also Deirdre KELLY, "Renée Borduas's quiet revolution" and Konrad YAKABUSKI, "Refus Global is little read, highly romanticized," both in *The Globe and Mail*, 8 august 1998.

32 The best interpretation of the film and the resulting controversy that I know of is by Ginette Michaud, originally given at the York University Colloquium mentioned above. Her text was excerpted in French in the *Spirale* "Dossier" on Automatism (see n.22) and later published in English in *Quebec Studies* 27 (Spring-Summer 1999): 105-17.

33 The catalogue, *Marcelle Ferron* (Montréal: Les 400 coups, 2000), includes essays by Louise Vigneault, Réal Lussier, Rose-Marie Arbour and France Vanlaethem, as well as colour illustrations of a cross-section of fifty years of Ferron's work.

34 Blake GOPNIK, "An Embarrassment of Riches," *The Globe and Mail*, 10 June 2000.

35 Pierre GAUVREAU, "Adventures of the Heart and Mind," in *Breaking the Chains*, ed. Renée FUFÈRE and Ingrid THOMPSON-COOPER, vol. 1 (Westmount: Robert Davies Multimedia Publishing, 1998), 3-21 (in French and English).

36 Michel DÉSAUTELS, ed., *Pierre Gauvreau: Les trois temps d'une paix, Entretiens* (Montréal: Éditions de l'Hexagone, 1997).

37 Ferron had been hospitalized for long periods with tuberculosis and was a single mother of three when she went to France in 1953. She conveys her energy well in her biography although at times her accounts should be taken with a grain of salt. *Marcelle Ferron, Esquisse d'une mémoire*, ed. Michel BRÛLÉ (Montréal: Les Éditions des Intouchables, 1996). Marcelle Ferron died November 19, 2001.

38 André-G. BOURASSA and Gilles LAPOINTE, eds., *Paul-Émile Borduas, Écrits II*, tomes 1-2 (Montréal: Éditions Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1997).

39 Gilles LAPOINTE, *L'envol des signes: Borduas et ses lettres* (Montréal: Fides-CÉTUQ, 1996).

QUELQUES ACTIVITÉS ET PUBLICATIONS AUTOUR DU CINQUANTIÈME ANNIVERSAIRE DU *REFUS GLOBAL*

Le présent article, qui se voulait à l'origine une recension du premier volume du *catalogue raisonné* de l'œuvre de Jean-Paul Riopelle, s'est transformé en un compte rendu de quelques-unes des nombreuses activités, nationales et internationales, suscitées en 1998 par le cinquantième anniversaire de la publication du manifeste *Refus global*, dont Riopelle était l'un des signataires.

Le *catalogue raisonné* est le premier d'une série projetée de huit volumes, merveilleux et ambitieux projet entrepris par Yseult Riopelle. Il couvre la production de Riopelle de 1939 à 1953, et comprend des huiles, des œuvres sur papier en différents médiums et des sculptures. Sept autres volumes seront consacrés aux mêmes genres jusqu'à 1992, et un volume séparé traitera des gravures. Le livre est un ouvrage somptueux avec d'excellentes reproductions couleur. Il est presque entièrement bilingue et comprend une très utile chronologie des expositions de 1943 à 1998, accompagnée de photos de Riopelle et de ses amis, d'illustrations d'œuvres d'art, de couvertures de catalogues et d'articles de journaux. Mais la section de plus de 100 pages d'illustrations couleur, au centre du livre, est pour moi à la fois un cadeau et un problème, parce que son organisation hétérogène oblige le lecteur à aller au *catalogue raisonné*, placé vers la fin du volume, pour avoir une idée du développement chronologique de l'œuvre de Riopelle.

Les principales études historiques et analytiques sont de Michel Waldberg et de Monique Brunet-Weinmann. Waldberg est un auteur français qui, en tant que fils de Patrick Waldberg (le critique d'art qui a contribué à la réputation de Riopelle), est familier depuis son enfance avec l'œuvre du peintre. Son texte (malgré un style affecté qui agace) réussit très bien à faire une synthèse des tableaux à partir d'une variété de sources, joignant l'automatisme, le chamanisme et le zen afin d'expliquer à la fois le dynamisme et la discipline de l'œuvre de Riopelle, ainsi que sa relation avec la nature. Brunet-Weinmann est une critique montréalaise dont le texte est axé beaucoup plus directement sur Riopelle lui-même, sur le contexte Québec/France/États-Unis et la période en question. J'ai particulièrement apprécié le fait qu'elle s'attaque au mythe tenace d'un Riopelle

grand buveur et homme d'extérieur dont le travail serait plus intuitif que réfléchi. Je remettrais en question certains détails de son étude, mais son travail est très précieux, surtout lorsqu'elle raconte le début des années cinquante à Paris, alors que tout était en effervescence et que critiques et peintres essayaient de définir ce qui était essentiel en regard de ce qui se faisait à New York et à Montréal.

De manière générale, dans l'attente des futurs volumes de ce *catalogue raisonné*, il y aurait lieu de revoir la présentation de la section couleur et d'éliminer soigneusement les inexactitudes et gaucheries de la traduction anglaise (le livre a d'abord été écrit en français, mais est presque entièrement bilingue). En résumé, il s'agit d'un projet courageux, généreux et nécessaire.

Le cinquantième anniversaire du *Refus global* a aussi suscité dans nombre de villes canadiennes, ainsi qu'à Paris, des expositions d'œuvres appartenant au mouvement automatiste. On se serait attendu à ce que l'exposition *Borduas et l'épopée automatiste*, au Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, soit la plus imposante. Elle s'est révélée moins que mémorable. Des expositions plus modestes, mais peut-être plus intéressantes, ont été celles tenues en 1997 et 1998 au Musée d'art de Mont-Saint-Hilaire, ainsi que d'autres, au Canada et en Europe, consacrées à des membres particuliers du groupe, y compris des expositions de photographies et leurs publications correspondantes, telles *Maurice Perron, photographies* au Musée du Québec et *Paul-Émile Borduas, photographe* par Gilles Lapointe. *Le Devoir* dans un supplément de 24 pages consacré au cinquantième anniversaire, soulignait la présence au sein du mouvement automatiste de danseurs, d'écrivains et de designers, aussi bien que de peintres. Il célébrait cette diversité par des articles signés par des universitaires et des journalistes et des illustrations couleur. La pièce de Claude Gauvreau, *Les Oranges sont vertes*, a été présentée pendant un mois à guichet fermé. On a organisé des séries de conférences et des tables rondes, la plupart à Montréal et Ottawa, ainsi que des symposiums à Montréal, Toronto et Paris. Il y a eu des parodies estudiantines du manifeste automatiste et une série radiophonique plus sérieuse et bien documentée de vingt heures sur le mouvement, ainsi qu'un film de Manon Barbeau (fille de Marcel), intitulé *Les enfants du Refus global* qui suscita de vives controverses dans la presse montréalaise.

En plus des catalogues, des comptes rendus de conférences et de la couverture médiatique, on a aussi publié, peu avant l'anniversaire, des livres importants sur l'histoire du mouvement automatiste, entre autres, *Pierre Gauvreau : Les trois temps d'une paix*, *Entretiens*; de Michel Désautel, *Les femmes du Refus global* de Patricia Smart; le second volume des *Écrits* de Paul-Émile Borduas, publié par André-G. Bourassa et Gilles Lapointe; *L'envol des signes* de Gilles Lapointe, étude de Borduas écrivain à travers sa correspondance, et *Chronique du mouvement automatiste québécois, 1941-1954* de François-Marc Gagnon. Toutes ces publications

apportent de nouvelles informations sur l'histoire du mouvement (en particulier sur le rôle de Robert Élie, critique et autrefois ami de Borduas) tout en étendant le champ de recherche à une diversité d'expressions artistiques et à un plus grand nombre de signataires du manifeste que par le passé. Ce compte rendu des activités auxquelles l'anniversaire a donné lieu n'est pas complet, loin de là, mais il donne une idée de l'importance du mouvement automatiste dans l'histoire culturelle du Québec.

Traduction: Élise Bonnette