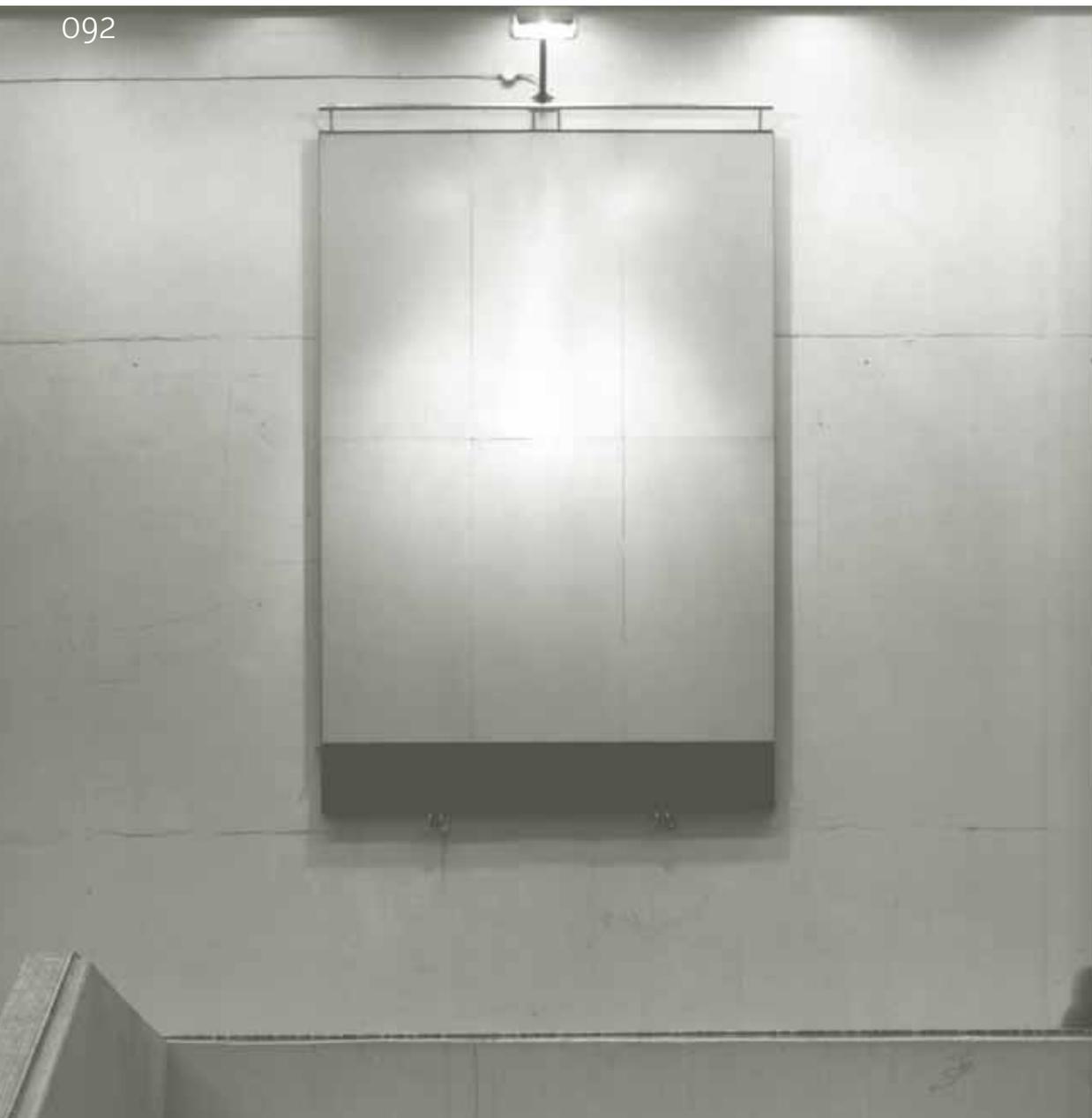


092



Nathalie de Blois

**Between the Possible and the Impossible:
A Circularity of Potentialities**

093



094 For more than ten years, Michel de Broin has been honing a trans-disciplinary art which calls systems and their articulation into question. Adopting a critical and playful attitude towards common objects and current ideas, he sets out to render visible, through richly profound metaphors and analogies, the forces at work in the movement of the energies which guide our actions and govern our impulses.

His heterogeneous and yet astoundingly coherent body of work has been built on a multifarious play of references to philosophy, language, science, art history, psychology and political and social issues. His work becomes the site of putting the mechanisms of power to the test, giving birth to a range of associations which inspire the discovery of plurality. Resistance, entropy, circulation, mobility, exchange and communication: these are concepts which lead the viewer to the circularity of movement, meaning and desire and which are the inherent concerns of an artistic project whose great fascination lies in the fact that it has succeeded in establishing hitherto unseen relations between distant or even contradictory concepts. By placing side by side art and technology, art and non-art, and the art world and what pertains to everyday life and public space, the spirit of this work is close to the historical avant-garde. But the failure of the great Utopian ideologies is, essentially, what it points up, constantly distorting and betraying itself in a perpetual calling into question. Through a strategy of playfulness and defiance, the oppositions which systematically present themselves in it reveal the search for a boundary point where opposites meet and borders are lifted.

Irreverent and paradoxical, de Broin's art endeavours to "invent solutions" without causes; ultimately, this renders the solutions absurd. In an interview with Nycole Paquin in 1999, he explained: "The work of art is placed at the centre of a *metaphorical chain* and, in the absence of a truth to be established or a message to promote, its ability to create new metaphors, that is to re-situate the problem, becomes much more interesting than its communicative qualities".¹

Everything plays out in the dizzying effects of reversals, perversions, trans-substantiations, repressions and liberations leading in turn, in this work which seeks to confuse the evidence, to drifting off course, impasses, errors and delusions. In comparing some of this work and by digressing where needed, the present essay will survey this erratic and unclassifiable body of work whose appeal lies in the fact that it escapes all attempts at categorisation and interpretation. The necessarily random groupings proposed here will analyse this irradiant project as a whole, beginning with some of the more significant of de Broin's earlier works and concluding with the new pieces *Silent Screaming* and *L'engin*, which form the basis of the exhibition behind the present publication.

¹ Michel de Broin, in correspondence with Nycole Paquin, "Peut-on s'entendre sur l'inattendu?," *Espace* 47 (Spring 1999): 7.

A Few Grains of Sand in the System

095

Michel de Broin's work has taken shape around the concept of resistance as a subversive force and source of potentialities.² **Opacity of the Body in the Transparency of the Circuit** (1997; p. 049-050),³ which was also the title of a solo exhibition at Circa gallery in Montreal, prepared the ground for a thorough-going investigation into the potential of the action of resistance. This piece, with its recourse to scientific demonstration, is made up of an electric circuit in which two containers of mineral oil connected by an electric cord connect a wine glass filled with red wine and a light bulb, both of which are immersed in the conductive liquid. This set-up makes it possible to send electric current through the wine to the light bulb to produce light. Because the wine is a poor conductor, however, its presence in the circuit has the effect of disturbing the flow of energy, giving off heat and reducing the amount of light produced by the light bulb.

The key to this work is to be found precisely in this dissipation of energy outside the circuit. The invisible *loss* – although perceptible to the touch – caused by the wine's poor conductivity becomes the expression of a transgressive potential, of an escape, a leak, an irradiant breach which can generate meaning and a sense of the infinite. It leads de Broin to think of any outside body introduced to a system in which power circulates as an agent of resistance. "One of the premises of my work," he explains, "is to introduce a foreign element to a normative system in order to see how this agent resists and produces a new reaction in its new setting, leading to transformations within the system as a whole."⁴ This oppositional force, by its very nature, brings about a deviation of the activity and the energy and is seen by the artist as a "brute force," a free and mobile force with no pre-determined moral value. In this sense it is the first principle of all his work. "From a political point of view," he explains, following Foucault, "it [power] can serve either serve the oppressor or enable resistance to oppression. . . . In visual art, power seems to me above all to be the potential or the propellant indispensable to the work."⁵

When transposed into social space, this systemic model, in which de Broin has brilliantly joined Christian and scientific references (resistance is embodied by the "opaque" wine, which is linked to the immanent fluidity of the spirit), makes material the relational parameters of communication and exchange. It emphasises, as the critic and curator Bernard Lamarche remarks, "the challenge of individuality within the dominant flow."⁶ In later extensions of this arrangement, a metaphor for the possibility of a far-reaching system, de Broin has used public space and traffic signs to call into question established norms and rules.

² It should also be noted that de Broin's Master's thesis in visual arts (UQAM, 1997) was on the theme of resistance.

³ A slightly different version of this work (*The Opacity of the Body in the Transparency of Circuits*), which has been destroyed, was exhibited two years earlier at the Yves Le Roux gallery. ⁴ Michel de Broin, "Matière dangereuse," *Inter, art actuel* 76 (Summer 2000): 30. ⁵ Michel de Broin, in correspondence with Nycole Paquin, "Peut-on s'entendre sur l'inattendu?," *Espace*, op. cit., 9. ⁶ Bernard Lamarche, "Michel de Broin: A Logic of Being Against?," trans. Timothy Barnard, *Parachute* 115 (Fall 2004): 16.



096 Signposts to a Hoax

To uncover evidence of power, Jean Baudrillard writes, one must take signs from behind and wager on simulation.⁷ De Broin is one of those artists who, by means of playful appropriation, enjoys removing signs and objects from their context and inserting them in a new environment, whether material or conceptual, and charging them with different meanings. The idea of the circuit as an organising and structuring force serving to orient, guide and direct is perverted in de Broin's relentless efforts to confuse, divert and mislead commonplace codes and objects, making them turn on themselves. By using strategies of appearance and narrative, he introduces false perspectives and arbitrarily creates obstacles in order to maintain suspense and bring about unsettling surprises.

Dangerous Substance (1999; p. 053-057) is an exemplary instance of this. Exhibited at the Centre des arts actuels Skol in October 1999, this installation, made up of various components, stems from one of de Broin's public interventions on the streets of Montreal in July that same year. His action, which has all the attributes of a road movie, consisted in driving around in an old Ford Galaxy 500 with a massive four-foot (1.22 m) black cube on the roof and driving under a pictogram which, at the entrance to one of the city's traffic tunnels, prohibits vehicles transporting dangerous substances from entering. De Broin thus re-framed and adapted Malevich's canonical work *Black Square on White Ground* (1913), transforming it into a representation of danger by virtue of its association with the traffic-signal system, which uses it as a symbol of danger.

By playing as he does with ambiguity and the slippages of meaning produced by bringing together different frames of reference, de Broin brings into play a historical backdrop which endow his ideas with great complexity. In the confusion between these two systems of representation, the icon becomes, paradoxically, both a transgressive and a prescriptive sign: "they meet by showing what exceeds order, either by prohibiting it, in the case of the pictogram, or by invoking it, in the case of Malevich's painting."⁸ De Broin doesn't just re-activate a historical symbol in order to signify its existence, he introduces it to a completely different narrative space, which takes form in a body of sculptures and photographs exhibited in gallery settings. The *in situ* work **The Content Overflows the Context** (1999; p. 057), for example, was an immense black cube passing through the wall of a room too narrow to contain it in such a way as to evoke the risks run when individuality attempts to break through the continuous screen of representation. This major work was supported by various photographic images, including **Searching for the Truth** (1999; p. 056), which depicts the artist's arrest by the police against a background of blank canvas, monochrome and "naked" like the large advertising billboards photographed by de Broin a year earlier (**Nude**, 1998; p. 092), before they were shrouded

⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1990 [1979]), 48-9.
⁸ Michel de Broin, "Matière dangereuse," *Inter, art actuel, op. cit.*, 31.

in their usual commercial covering.⁹ Insisting on the idea that bringing the abstract into contact with the concrete and the pragmatic is a dangerous act, these works use sarcasm to illustrate the complexity of the relations between art and dominant ideas.

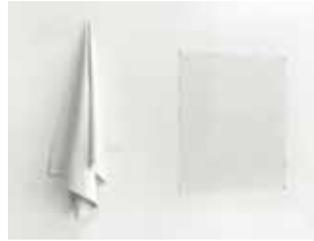
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The seriousness with which de Broin carries out and presents his intervention gives added depth to *Dangerous Substance*. In the detours he invents to confuse signs and concepts he brings out the comic and tragic spirit of irony, which, as Vladimir Jankélévitch remarks, "implies both its own futility and the involuntary temptation to let oneself be taken by it."¹⁰ The ironist, Jankélévitch continues, "creates a war to laugh, a comedy of fate, but with the underlying idea that this party is like an abridged version of the chance of destiny, that this game is an elliptical war, that this danger-free hunt is a stylisation of dangerous adventure."¹¹

Alongside the transgression of boundaries and the experience of the outside at the heart of *Dangerous Substance* is the feint of **Épater la galerie** (2002; p. 058-60), in which de Broin adopts a symbol associated with traffic signs and simulates its immersion in public space, thereby foiling the systems of meaning and power. Wanting to make visible the Villa Merkel, in Germany, where he had been invited to create an *in situ* work, de Broin ran the walls of the building through with immense arrows, as if to insist on the fact – at a time when people are stuck with the inability to define the meaning of art with conviction – that the designated site is well and truly an art space and that what one finds there is well and truly art. Through the ironic use of a stereotypical symbol of North American commercial culture, seen on buildings alongside highways to inform motorists of the presence of a motel or restaurant, de Broin carried out an astute displacement: these oversized arrows cutting right through the walls and pointing in every direction shifted attention onto the building and its empty gallery spaces. By becoming invisible through the misunderstanding they provoke, the arrows point to the identity and symbolic value of the museum itself, an institution that is a sacred site for some and an inaccessible one for others.

This attention to the boundary between inner and outer spaces orients de Broin's discourse on the question of the site of art and connotes the permeability that has arisen over the past few decades between public space and museum space. As Jean-Philippe Uzel emphasises, "De Broin has understood that public space is a site just as institutional as the museum, that today public sites are in fact the ultimate extension of the museum."¹² De Broin's interventions inside and outside this space is in keeping with the principle of porosity so fundamental to his project. Other work, such as **Out of the White** (1996), also places itself in close relation to the site in which it is found in order to emphasise the unflagging link between art and the concrete matter found in reality. In this case, de Broin removed from the "body" of one of the

⁹ At the time of his solo show *Chercher l'erreur* in 2003, de Broin described these panels as: "a free space which opens in regulated public space. Free space can not be confused with the idea of freedom underlying liberalism, where we find the concept in a world of discourses in which we must choose between various determinations according to the norms, institutions and responsibility assigned to them. Through this hole I saw a crack in normalcy, unconnected to any intentionality of meaning, in which there is neither culture nor nature." Michel de Broin, press release for the exhibition *Chercher l'erreur*, gallery Pierre-François Quелlette art contemporain, Montreal, 2003. ¹⁰ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L'ironie* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), 57. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57. In this passage, Jankélévitch is referring to a text by Georg Simmel, "Das Abenteuer," in *Philosophische Kultur*, 1911, 11-28. ¹² Jean-Philippe Uzel, "Michel de Broin: l'espace public mis à nu par l'artiste même," *Spirale* 191 (July-August 2003): 47.



098 walls of Circa in Montreal a thick chip of paint created by numerous layers accumulated over the years, thereby creating a fine metaphor for the exchanges between subjective existence and the outer world presiding over any creative activity. Like electrical resistance which, in order to exist, “must employ ruses with the circuit by seizing the available power,”¹³ this symbolic rendering naked denotes that art must know how to ravish and seduce signs in order to *épater la galerie* – the title of a work discussed above and an idiomatic expression in French which means to impress or astound the onlooker – the “gallery” – but which is no doubt used here in reference to the art gallery as well.

A kind of rapture is also carried out by the work *L'éclaireur éclairé* (2000; p. 061-062), an imposing figure encamped between the interior and exterior of an educational establishment who has seized hold of a lamp post to light up the building housing it. Not unlike Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods in order to give it to humankind, this simultaneously audacious and irreverent gesture of appropriation is meant as a metaphor for the – entirely legitimate – search for knowledge we all share. “Here,” de Broin explains, “the character’s intrepid gesture, in its singular autonomy, illuminates and provides lumination.”¹⁴ This piece, which revisits the realist aesthetic practised by Malevich in his later work, is a fine allusion to the latter’s battle against illusion in painting before he re-introduced representation into his work. It is also a reference to Enlightenment philosophy – among whose subscribers was Stalin – which, despite vigorous resistance, has carried the flame of a collective ideal of liberation and free thought. It reminds us especially that the Utopian aspirations of the Enlightenment – which, like any ideology, was the fruit of beliefs – was also a time of unthinking excess, which we must regard today with a critical and enlightened eye.

The search for meaning and truth at the heart of this work, shaped by the vocabulary of road traffic and street systems, takes us beyond common sense towards alternative visions and playful associations which force a perversion of concepts and signs in such a way as to ridicule them and make them thrive in their absurdity. This is the case of *Entrelacement* (2001; p. 063-064), a segment of a paved path twisted around itself and added to a heavily-used bicycle path along the Lachine canal. The path’s capricious convolutions, which recall the spontaneity of automatic drawings, ironically render it virtually unusable without running the risk of accidents or collisions. In its intrinsic contradiction, the path’s only consequence is to lead anyone who takes it to the perplexity of paradox. In a foundational text, de Broin has described the meaning of his project, which strives to catch out “rational” logic:

Above all, my works are errors; by this I mean opportunities to err and open to uncertainty. In the absence of a truth which could guarantee the validity of a proposition, objects run through with holes take shape most often in a paradoxical, if not problematic, experience of the exterior.¹⁵

¹³ Michel de Broin, “Résistance et expérience du circuit,” in *Eurêka* (Hull: AXENÉO7 art contemporain/Éditions d’art Le Sabord, 1999), n. p. ¹⁴ Michel de Broin, text accompanying a project submitted to the Programme d’intégration des arts à l’architecture du Québec, 1999. ¹⁵ Michel de Broin, press release for the exhibition *Chercher l’erreur*, op. cit.

099 Erring and errors are thus treated as gaps which promote an experience of boundaries, presenting a conceptual and formal territory of immense richness, inspiring de Broin constantly to call into question the meaning systematically superimposed on objects and to dissolve this meaning in order to give rise, as Rose-Marie Arbour points out, to the openness and freedom of these objects.¹⁶ This idea of error and its corollaries, uselessness, overturning, losing one’s bearings and the danger of collision and catastrophe, are re-examined in the public sculpture *Revolutions* (2003; p. 065-066), which consists of a giant staircase tied in a hollow knot. The coiled motif of this imposing metallic armature which, on the one hand, recalls the spiral staircases typical of Montreal’s urban environment, and, on the other, is a nod to the rides found in an amusement park close by, seems to present the risk of perpetual thrill. Above all, however, this airborne helix, like Escher’s astute buildings, perverts the primary and fundamental quality of a staircase, its verticality, in favour of a cyclical movement of “the eternal return of the same,” to use Nietzsche’s expression. De Broin had already nicely used this play of altering the internal principle of an object in the work *Tromper le sens* (1997), made of a shotgun whose barrel had been bent to form a spiral-shaped shell. By manipulating its tangible quality, de Broin subjected the weapon to a two-fold trap, both functional and semiotic: he compromised its basic function by disarming it, at the same time stripping it of the aura of threatening power usually associated with it. With *Revolutions* too de Broin, for whom the double entendre remains a privileged technique, insists both verbally and with respect to the situations themselves upon the title’s evocative power: “everyone can project themselves onto it . . . and enter into the game of ‘permanent revolution,’”¹⁷ he explains, emphasising that the work can be understood either as eternal repetition or as a revolutionary force establishing a new order. In addition to this ambiguity there is a reference to Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* (1920), which also called up the dynamic image of revolution. De Broin, however, reverses the optimism and idea of progress found in the historical avant-garde by means of the turning inside out he inflicts on his structure, thereby preventing any form of progress.

Mobilisation and Parasitism

Revolution as the motor of transformation and emancipation is clearly one of the guiding threads in de Broin’s work, where everything turns on the power to mobilise, channel, regenerate and re-orient energies, despite the logic that often stands in their way. The sculpture *Black Whole Conference* (2006; p. 067-068), a symbolic embodiment of the reversal of order brought on by the concentration of mobilising forces, is a sphere made up of more than 70 chairs arranged in a uniform and tightly-knit network, like a massive star which, when it collapses, creates a “black hole.” Keeping any foreign element at a distance – including the viewer – this astounding assemblage becomes the site of the expression of a power displaced onto a new centre, where each element has the same function in order to ensure the

¹⁶ Rose-Marie Arbour, “Pour en savoir davantage . . . chercher l’erreur,” *Espace 66* (Winter 2004): 40. ¹⁷ Michel de Broin, text accompanying a project submitted to the Programme d’intégration des arts à l’architecture du Québec, 2002.

stability of the group. This self-protecting network inspires the image of a cell of conspirators whose secret machinations and essential goal are to preserve overall control of the forces present. De Broin addressed the question of mobilisation and of appropriating symbolic space a few years earlier in the video installation **Red Monochrome** (2002; p. 071-072). This satirical work put two animated sequences in parallel: on the one hand there was a putsch by a group of red chairs in a cluttered warehouse, forcing the retreat of all non-red chairs; and on the other was the proud dance of a pink chair in the midst of the reds, which were fascinated by its demonstration of difference. The play of intrigues, influences, confrontations, expulsion and seduction in these animated videos humorously describes the contradictions inherent to the interactions which regulate relations between individuals and order social life. It is also part of the overall logic of revealing how systems function seen in all of de Broin's work, whether those systems belong to the physical, socio-political or cultural worlds.

De Broin's work is also rooted in reality, as we have seen with *Dangerous Substance*, as a way of finding concrete application and to get closer to the social role de Broin intends for the act of resistance. Doing so, however, does not provoke rupture; rather, by constantly seeking to merge with what he is resisting, through strategies of meddling and dissimulating, he feeds re-orientations and creates conditions for the transformation of seeing, acting or perceiving. There is no point in working "against" systems, he warns. Like electrical resistance which, in order to be effective, must take its energy from the very circuit it is resisting,¹⁸ it is enough to encounter these systems and, through a simple manipulation of appearances, to blend in with them, connect with them, and work craftily from within them.

This idea was fully materialised in the **Stick to Resist** (p. 051-052, p. 069-070) project which, since 1998, has taken different forms. Calling once more on the metaphor of resistance in electrical circuitry, de Broin has created small suction and exchange devices which grip onto any metallic surface, like leeches stick to the skin, in order to draw power from it. In an art gallery, these small parasitical organs infiltrate here and there, desperately grabbing onto radiators, emergency exits and any other "feeder" in order to resist. But without the circuit, which enables them to suck up energy unhindered, these little resistors fall right over, dangling from the end of their electric cord, and the sculpture is destroyed.

In the dynamic relationship in which power is played out, there are no more dominant and dominated than there are victims and executioners, as Baudrillard remarks. No separate positions, because power is realised where it is challenged to exist. If power can not be "exchanged" in accord with this minimal cycle of seduction, challenge and ruse, Baudrillard continues, then it simply disappears.¹⁹ The work's entire power resides in this relational effect.

Stick to Resist poses the question of autonomy and examines the interdependent relationship between art and the art system with deft irony by materialising this relationship in the work itself. It was later extended into public space in a portable and autonomous version, installed in the Paris subway system in 2004 with the artist Ève K. Tremblay playing the role

¹⁸ Michel de Broin, "Résistance et expérience du circuit," in *Eurêka*, op. cit. ¹⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, op. cit., 45.

of an activist, at a time when France's Vigipirate system was on orange alert.²⁰ Covering a larger field of action, this autonomous version carried out an indispensable task of citizenship,²¹ the maintenance of a social bond devoid of interest in today's society, which has become increasingly weakened and entirely devoted to the search for efficiency.

This attempt to short-circuit power through infiltration and simulation in de Broin's work is also evident in his gesture of seizing concepts and turning them back on themselves. Invited to the 11th Pančevo Biennial of Visual Arts in Serbia and Montenegro in 2004, de Broin exhibited **Reparations: A Re-evaluation of Waste** (2004; p. 075-076), a video in which an action carried out earlier in Paris unfolds. In it, de Broin, armed with a launching device made out a bicycle pump and a simple rubber stopper, launched into the sky discarded plastic bottles found while out walking. By vigorously pumping compressed water and air into the recovered bottles, he created intense pressure which culminated with the violent release of the liquid – a discharge not unlike orgasmic release – and with the transformation of these discarded bottles into veritable little rockets.

De Broin wanted to adapt the concept for the Biennial and to situate it in the specific context of recent Serbian history. He built an on-site "Bureau des réparations" ("Reparations Bureau"), made up of a more elaborate version of his launcher with the goal of ridding the city of the clutter of these cast-off bottles by launching them into the air. With this seemingly functional device of dubious usefulness, de Broin put into practice the concept of "reparation" by extolling its instrumentalisation to the point of absurdity. For the seasoned entrepreneur, he wrote,

the collapse of the local economy makes it possible to benefit from a reduction in production costs. In addition, the dilapidated infrastructure generates a considerable increase in needs in every sphere of activity. Finally, the weakening of regulations makes it possible to operate freely and to establish oneself solidly in the country being sold off. In short, Serbia represents a business opportunity for our demagogic company. [It] doesn't appear to have any recycling system and containers carry no deposit. This explains in part the overabundance of garbage strewn about the landscape. Our industrial system profits from this reality, in contrast with that of rich countries, which have been able to eradicate the harmful effects of industry.²²

In this text, a mixture of fact and fiction in the mode of deceptive propaganda, de Broin evokes, not without derision, the new "industrial ethic," in which un-avowed money-making intentions are concealed behind humanitarian and environmental pretensions. He is referring to the recovery and recycling of depleted uranium by a number of countries, including Canada and the United States, to be used in the manufacture of weapons used by NATO in particular in its "humanitarian missions."²³ Replying to the absurdity of these operations carried out under noble pretences, *Reparations* plunges into a world of contradictions. Here, de Broin describes even more forcefully the satirical nature of his company and the perverse reversal it gives rise to:

²⁰ Vigipirate is a security system used in France to prevent or react to terrorist threats. ²¹ Michel de Broin, personal web site: www.micheldebroin.org. ²² Michel de Broin, "Bureaux des réparations," *Inter, art actuel* 89 (Winter 2005): 46. ²³ The bombing of Belgrade by NATO in 1999 polluted the air, water and soil and brought about serious health problems and the death of many people exposed to this contamination.

Sending massive quantities of bottles into the air is a new way to participate in the reconstruction of Serbia, by creating value out of garbage.

Although the transformation of Serbian garbage is a way of seeking to improve the lot of our fellow man through profitable action carried out in a disinterested manner, complaints by Serbian citizens have forced us to suspend our activities. Recycling is a demanding program and we have chosen to locate our factory in the heart of the downtown area in order to facilitate the collection of garbage and ensure the voluntary participation of citizens. However, the importance of acting for the greater good and other problems of communication have kept us from organising public consultations which would have enabled us to inform residents living near the factory about the possible fallout of insoluble bodies in space.

When their skyward journey is complete, the bottles tend to fall back onto the ground or in the gardens of the local population. It must be understood that the recycling cycle must be maintained, at the risk of being hit on the head by a bottle. While some neighbours, in order to maintain the cycle, have been happy to return these bodies fallen from the skies, others have done so with a great deal of discontent, which has led us to close the factory.

The factory will remain shut down while we wait for their consciousness to be raised with respect to the reality of recycling. The know-how and technological set-up will remain entirely at their disposition, however, ready to serve the people when they are ready for the next campaign of massive recuperations.²⁴

By this specious reasoning, de Broin demonstrates that he knows how to play at hinting and to use the subtle art of irony which, as Jankélévitch remarks, "mimics false truths, obliging them to spread and deepen, to itemise their baggage [and] reveal falsehoods which, without it, would pass unnoticed."²⁵ Like irony, which reveals the way such discourses take us in, *Reparations* turns against itself and is built on what it claims to undermine by charging the absurd to administer the evidence of its own impossibility.²⁶ In other words, it responds to the absurdity of the situation, which it intends to *repair*, with a Utopian "solution" that is just as absurd.

Reverse Entropy

This form of reparation is very close to the concept of *expenditure*, described by Georges Bataille as an ensemble of unproductive forces characterised "by the fact that in each case the accent is put on loss, which should be as great as possible if the activity is to take on its full meaning."²⁷ The concept of productive expenditure, which is latent in many of de Broin's

²⁴ Michel de Broin, "Bureaux des réparations," *Inter, art actuel*, op. cit., 46. ²⁵ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *L'ironie*, op. cit., 100. ²⁶ *Ibid.* ²⁷ Georges Bataille, *La part maudite and La notion de dépense* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980), 28.

earlier works and is expressed, in *Reparations*, by staging the desire to "do too much," is a central theme in the works **Shared Propulsion Car** (2005; p. 077-078) and **Keep on Smoking** (2006; p. 079-080), which address ideas of ecology, the recycling of energy and entropy while at the same time employing the principle of its contrary. 103

If you were among those walking down the busy streets of New York in the summer of 2005 you may have noticed a 1986 Buick Regal drive by. But then again, perhaps not, given that the *Shared Propulsion Car*, despite its differences, looks just like any other car of the same make. Without modifying its external appearance, de Broin stripped this vehicle of a number of internal components before putting it on the road, replacing its engine, suspension, transmission and electrical system by four pairs of pedals. Apart from reducing the vehicle's maximum speed to 15 km/hour, which disrupted the flow of traffic, this modification made driving the vehicle a peculiar experience. Requiring the concerted effort of four passengers to get it going, *Shared Propulsion Car* is diametrically opposed to the individualism inherent in driving an automobile in our day and age.

The issue raised by the car with no gasoline-driven engine lies in the organisation that must be created so that the work force (the cyclists) find in their common efforts a source of liberating self-worth and an "ability to act." For de Broin, this cooperation must be thought of us a sovereign process in which the objective of the process (its goal) and the process itself (the pooling of labour power) use mutual influence to create a cycle capable of being sustained in perpetuity. By replacing the non-renewable energy obtained from gasoline with that produced by human effort, de Broin is thus seeking to reverse the phenomenon of entropy, which is present in any system of exchange, by creating machines capable of functioning indefinitely thanks to the only energy that is eternally renewable, he remarks humorously: "the will to power."²⁸ *Keep on Smoking*, which appears to use the opposite strategy, is a product of the same reflection on the eternal quest to surpass oneself and on the tendency towards the excessive consumption of natural energy resources by human activity. This work also uses a transportation vehicle, a bicycle, but one that has been modified to produce smoke. Paradoxically, the use of this object puts contradictory forces into play, one fatally condemning the other: the more the cyclist pedals, the more smoke the bicycle produces; and the more smoke produced, the more uncomfortable the cyclist becomes. By creating a cycle of transformation in which the dimension of making is distinctly joined by that of unmaking, de Broin reveals the perverse effects of some of our everyday activities and consumption habits. The work expresses the subversive power of consuming, in an act of pure loss, all excess energy, and is the culmination of the artist's desire to endow this loss with a positive property by seizing "what is seen as negative and returning it to creative power."²⁹

In the same vein, in 2003 de Broin created **Blue Monochrome** (p. 073-074), consisting of a garbage dumpster transformed into a comfortable therapeutic bath with water jets. This hybrid work, like those described above, uses an innocuous appearance to corrupt the meaning of the utilitarian object and formulate critical reflection on the use and recycling of

²⁸ Adopting Nietzsche's well-known expression. ²⁹ Rose-Marie Arbour, "Pour en savoir davantage . . . chercher l'erreur," *Espace*, op. cit., 40.

104 energy resources. In its wickedly clever and disconcerting movement from the image of the dirty garbage dumpster to the jacuzzi with chlorinated and filtered water, the work puts our relation to a category of unattractive ordinary objects to the test, thereby altering its “affective colouration.” Emptied of its trash and filled with clear, sterilised water, the container becomes “a *frame* ensuring the purity of its content,”³⁰ de Broin writes, parodying in the process the Greenbergian dogma of the specificity and purity of the medium – through the abolition, in painting, of the form/ground opposition.

Everything Swallows Me Up³¹

The over-fullness as the hardening of the discourse threatening the equilibrium of systems – whether they be electrical, political or social – present in many of de Broin’s works is counter-balanced by a number of works which use emptiness as material. In 2002, as part of the exhibition *La demeure*, curated by Marie Fraser,³² which called for artists to intervene in public space, de Broin proposed to suspend a trailer – which he would occupy for several days – from a crane, tens of metres from the ground. His project, which was aborted due to the inability to obtain the necessary permits to carry it out,³³ was in some respects similar to the experience of Henry David Thoreau, who sought, by finding refuge in the woods, to give renewed meaning to daily life. De Broin’s photographic montage *Solitude* (2002; p. 081-082) provides a Utopian and absurd illustration of this ideal of an independent life by presenting a view of the trailer sailing through the sky while underneath stands the crowded urban centre. This depiction of the tiny trailer on the fringes of society, hoisted up between the space of the community and extreme solitude, embodies this idea of refuge, but a dizzying one. “Suddenly,” de Broin notes, “the safety and comfort promised by the dwelling are compromised by the imminent danger of falling.”³⁴ Like the author of *Civil Disobedience*, for whom the remedy for conformism and social resignation was to open up to “the other side of what is inside us,” our experience of the non-place in *Solitude* becomes an opportunity to feel the seduction of emptiness.

Retreat and isolation are also present in *Hole* (2002; p. 083-084), a trailer parked temporarily in various Montreal neighbourhoods during the exhibition *La demeure*. At the back of the trailer, de Broin fashioned a smooth and rounded opening, just large enough for a person to penetrate the pure-white inner cabin, tiny but inviting. Exalting the strange power of empty forms, this ambiguous and precarious cavity engendered astonishment and even defiance, but desire quickly found there a site for contemplative absorption. This space is not hermetically sealed off from the world, separate from and opposed to it; rather, it is a space in which a dialogue between the constructed cavity and its environment emerges. Orifice, hollow,

³⁰ Michel de Broin, personal web site: www.micheldebroin.org. ³¹ These powerful words begin the novel by Réjean Ducharme, *L’avalée des avalés*. ³² In collaboration with the gallery Optica, Montreal, 13 September to 7 December 2002. ³³ On this topic, de Broin writes: “From a strictly practical point of view, the act of hanging a trailer from a crane presents no danger whatsoever, nor does it present a technical problem. It is commonly used to transport workers to the upper floors of very high buildings. Here the danger is felt and considered symbolically. I try to give shape to a way of perceiving danger by locating it at the centre of a paradox in which the imaginary fails; thus an extreme experience.” Unpublished text, 2002. ³⁴ Artist’s notes, project statement.

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passage, conduit, channel: the figure of the hole adds a sensual basis to the work, in which the forces of desire are expressed. From “inside” to “outside” life’s entire imaginary extends between the schema of penetration, inspiration and absorption, of opening, reception, assimilation, envelopment and involution. *Hole* reveals the flesh. It is a naked, invaginated form, waiting for an audacious person to dare to be swallowed up in the intimacy of its nest.

105

Of the many works by de Broin which play with borders by shifting them in order to penetrate other worlds and to let oneself be penetrated in turn, many employ a latent sexuality and have an ambiguous relationship to the symbolism of repression and attraction. In the works *Objet perdu* (2002; p. 085-086), *Dedans/Dehors* (2005) and *Ironie* (2002; p. 087-088), all three of which are founded on the organic quality of their materials and the dynamic antithesis of inside and outside, the hole, as a cavity around which matter takes shape, becomes the site of a libidinous movement.

In the first two pieces named above, a “cave-dwelling body,” lying long and supple on the floor, recoils into a small hole in the wall at the first sign of a physical presence in the gallery, re-appearing only when the visitor has left. This in-and-out movement, indicative of an ambivalent attitude made up of attraction and defiance, is compulsively repeated as visitors move about the gallery. Through the eternal resumption that these works enact, they create humorous metaphors for the psychoanalytic concept of the “return of the repressed.” The “lost object” hiding itself from sight excites our curiosity and thereby opens the door to desire. In this act of dissimulation, however, we sense a depraved pleasure of economy and reserve: instead of leading to the satisfaction of our desire, this comedy leads to the observer’s frustration. Our expectations are not met and our ultimate pleasure is refused.

Virile power is turned to derision in another manner in the sculpture *Ironie*, which depicts archetypal figures of femininity and masculinity through the invagination of a protruding membrane enclosed in a plexiglas case itself part of a table. Inspired by the emptiness, it becomes deformed, contracts, reverses upon itself and passes from protuberance to cavity in a movement of “mechanical copulation” which, without concealing anything, displays its absurdity. The integration of this absurd mechanism celebrating usefulness to a piece of furniture from the 1950s – a period in which machinery, standardisation and functional aesthetics were glorified – is a veritable “ironic reverie on the principle of functionality,”³⁵ to borrow Baudrillard’s expression, a fugitive from the hegemony of efficiency.

The hole is also the power of absorption and annihilation, as the book perforated in its centre in the photograph *Sofia* (2003) suggests. This photograph was taken in the city which lends it its name, a name which also suggests a fascination for the mysteries of woman. Opening on an unfathomable space which, like an abyss, lies between the powers of knowledge and those of indoctrination, this work establishes a semantic link between the etymology of the word Sophia and the name of the city, today deprived of Soviet “wisdom” in favour of other values. It suggests, as Socrates taught us, that neither ideological indoctrination nor hiding behind one’s knowledge are guarantors of wisdom: only “Sophia’s desire is ever-lasting,”

³⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, *op. cit.*, 64. [Translation modified – Trans.]

de Broin emphasises; virtue itself can not be transmitted. Like the cosmic black hole whose influence increases as it takes on matter, the battered book absorbing Sofia beyond meaning becomes the expression of an inspiration to free thought devoid of all dogmatism.

Machinations

This idea of a liberatory piercing, which is not unlike the will employed in the artistic gesture, returns in **Silent Screaming** (sketch, 2006; p. 014), a work which invokes the concepts of power and coercion. The work consists of a kind of strangled circulatory device in which a bell glass connected to a pump encloses an alarm, muffling the obstinate hammering of a small hammer on a metal disk and silencing its acoustic appeal. Through a strange reversal, the “cry” of the alarm, which would normally signal an emergency situation, becomes here the enemy to combat, the energy to contain. The ambiguity of power is manifest in this mechanism which, like an inverted megaphone, prevents the unimpeded communication of the acoustic signal. Devoured by the void, the alert becomes the expression of a desiring force suppressed by a repressive system struggling against anything which threatens the existing order. And power ceases to be a strong source of safety and becomes an alarming symptom and source of anxiety by virtue of its censorship.

Forbiddance, however, as *Silent Screaming* suggests, can never triumph over the strength of the desire for expression. Like the conscientious objector who, in the political arena, rises up against measures which appear to be coherent but are irrelevant and essentially destined to reinforce determinisms, the little hammer kept in isolation by the vacuum-sealed container resists the coercive forces weighing upon it and continues its assault. Despite its forced retrenchment, this messenger, whose efforts seek to express the will, has not completely acted in vain. Its stubbornness becomes located in an alternative force located elsewhere, in the agitation of the water contained in reservoirs connected by a rubber tube to the “orifices” of the container. Thwarting the machinations of oppressive power, the bubbles which rise to the surface testify to the way the system is perturbed – a fact that is otherwise invisible – and to the “seething” brought about by the agitation of the small perturbing agent. Through this shift, an attempt to respond to the campaign of fear and disinformation currently under way on a planetary scale, affecting our lives and imperilling democratic rights, de Broin renders the coercion harmless and re-directs the triumphant energy in the direction of a playful overflowing, causing the scandal of hollow ends to shatter.

This vague sense of menace is also present in **L’engin** (2006; p. 002-003). With this work of imposing scale hollowed out in its centre, de Broin distances himself from utilitarian objects in favour of an abstract structure. With its deep cavity, the organic and enveloping form of this impressive oblong figure might suggest a cocoon, a shell, ovum or egg; because of its size, however, we associate it with a piece of heavy machinery such as a missile or an aircraft engine with holes throughout it caused by streams of projectiles. In the end, however, this form does not completely resemble any specific object; it imposes itself above all through its corporality, through its physical and aerodynamic presence and its inertia.

Contrasting with *L’engin*’s resolute immobility, planted in the middle of the gallery, are images showing it suspended in the air like a weightless balloon. These model images, which could be a simulation or demonstration of the technical aspects of this “unidentified flying object,” add an element of fiction to the work and raise doubts about its identity and function; its title, moreover, maintains this semantic fuzziness. Other documents also feed our doubt and cast uncertainty on the work. Aerial images of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec show a glimpse of the work’s shadow cast upon it. How was this unusual object brought into the museum?

Too large to have entered the building housing it without causing damage, this disproportionately-sized object – recall the work *The Content Overflows the Context* – is an illustration of the necessity, for any energy of resistance, to force its entry into the system it wishes to de-stabilise in order to deploy its forces. Here, where the boundary is attained, is where the potential for going beyond and liberation is found.

L’engin, however, can also be approached from the perspective of conspiracy theories, which reach their most complete form around the events of September 11. The absorption and unexpected presence of this mysterious, troublesome, indefinable and fascinating “machine” within the museum recalls the attack on the Pentagon, in which, after the event, no part was ever found making it possible to say with certainty that the Boeing 757-200 had penetrated the façade of this imposing government building. According to the official White House version, the airplane was literally pulverised in the “belly” of the building, the symbol of American power, at the moment of impact. But the gaping hole in the building’s façade, several metres wide and perfectly round, has left many people sceptical of this theory; in place of an aircraft, they see a missile.³⁶

De Broin makes fun of the dangerous logic underlying the Pentagon’s explanation by symbolically breaching and penetrating the museum’s interior with his conical prototype. He fallaciously identifies art with dubious inventions which imperil the social and political order and, in so doing, he reveals the complexity of relations between the normative and the aesthetic; that is to say, between what is allowed (socially, judicially, morally) and the informal conventions delineating art. The uncertainty around *L’engin* and its legitimacy appears to revive the ideological and aesthetic debates around the insubordination of the artistic avant-garde, which had to broaden the boundaries of art so that the criteria for acceptance as art be loosened and new practices be admitted to the institution.³⁷ It recalls that it was only after a slow evolution that the “too full” decried by a generation could be integrated perfectly well by that which succeeded it.

³⁶ Some analysts propose theories and explanations which profoundly call into question official declarations on the subject of the attacks of 11 September 2001. See Thierry Meyssan, *9/11: The Big Lie* (New York: USA Books, 2002), and *Pentagate* (London: Carnot, 2002). ³⁷ De Broin is referring in particular to the legal action brought by the sculptor Brancusi against the United States in 1928 in order to oblige it to recognise one of his sculptures as a work of art (this work, having been declared a utilitarian object by U.S. customs, was subjected to significant duties when it was imported into the country). This suit brought out “the difficulty in building a consensus around art, a highly invested concept but one which recent attempts at deconstruction had, for at least a generation, begun to undermine.” In the minds of its detractors, abstraction was the sign of a lack of talent and the artist’s inability to perform representation. In addition, these detractors maintained that “[a]bstraction or, more precisely, an excess of abstraction, distorts and ‘perverts’ a work of art, to the point of making it lose its identity.” Nathalie Heinrich, “‘C’est un oiseau,’ Brancusi vs États-Unis, ou quand la loi définit l’art,” *Droit et société* 34 (1996): 652, 666.

108 This parallel between the incomprehension by their contemporaries of the artistic propositions of the innovative artists of modernity, such as Malevich, Brancusi and Duchamp, and the general confusion reigning today around the tragic events of the present-day world – terrorist threats, bomb attacks, armed occupation of other countries, wars, etc. – shows us that, in the field of real events, as in that of forms and ideas, the possible can eventually reveal itself through a series of impossibilities.

Using only insinuations and hints, Michel de Broin's work as a whole thinks, experiences, tests and delights in the senses and intelligence. Rigorous and rational in spots, in others it lets itself slip along the shores of sensuality, eroticism and impulses while playing on other occasions with the imprecise boundaries between reality and fiction. These peculiar features mark the paradoxical nature of a body of work which scrutinises and plumbs the ways in which systems of power function without, however, seeking to seize hold of them.

Founded instead on the ability both to deceive and to undeceive by putting into tension the forces and energies of sources as diverse as electricity, mechanics, ideology and libidinal impulses, de Broin's various manoeuvres and mechanisms are all the work of playful machinations, of baffling mises en scène and shrewd ruses which encourage a constant interrogation of the interdependence of systems. Faithful to the spirit of its times, this body of work rises up against the evidence, scours truths, searches for the error and patiently insinuates itself wherever there is a crack in our illusions. In a multi-faceted approach which calls on both perceptive logic and affective investment experimentation in social space, it makes it possible to imagine new visions of the world and new perspectives on existence. Like any ideal, it reveals itself in the dizziness of a threat against sterile immobility.

