



## LIGHT MAGIC

*The measured structures and time-based illuminations of Samuel Roy-Bois*

Interview by Sydney Hermant

Samuel Roy-Bois is a Vancouver-based artist, by way of Québec City, Montréal and New York. His practice spans architectural installation, drawing, performance, literature and music — each intertwining with and breathing life into the others in varied, intimate combinations. His practice contemplates carving out welcoming places in our built environments while illuminating the porous imaginary offered up by daily life. I had the opportunity to work with Roy-Bois when he installed his show *J'ai entendu un bruit et je me suis sauvé* at the Or Gallery in 2003, where I was working at the time. The labour-intensive installation was based on Étienne Boullée's unrealized *Cenotaph for Newton* (1784), which Roy-Bois sought to complete, while reversing the principles of its construction, to create a tinier, messier, more intimate counterpoint to Boul-

lée's ambitious and monumental plans. I have followed Roy-Bois's work since then, and enjoy the pathos and weirdness he brings out in his constructed spaces, drawings and thoughts. Roy-Bois has been busy, with shows at Diaz Contemporary in Toronto, the Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery in Montréal and St. Mary's University Art Gallery in Halifax all in the first six months of 2008, on the heels of solo exhibitions at the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Montréal, the Republic Gallery in Vancouver and Quartier Éphémère in Paris in 2007. We began this interview between projects almost a year ago on the other side of the pond, Roy-Bois in Paris and me in Spain; we finished it up here in Vancouver, which we both call home.

**SYDNEY HERMANT** I wanted to start with light and obscurity to play in your work. It feels

really epic when I write it down, but I am thinking of material/density and ephemera, and also how you choose to reveal your process, how the audience participates in your work, whether that be in your musical performances, your participation with Jacob Wren's *La Petite et Moyenne Entreprise* (PME) based in Montréal or your larger-scale installations...

**SAMUEL ROY-BOIS** Working with light sometimes made me feel a bit opportunistic. It can be so efficient. But before anything else, it's a way for me to create a welcoming spirit. My work is often raw, to say the least, so having some light creates a sort of counterpoint to roughness. The way I use light in *J'ai entendu un bruit, je me suis sauvé* (2003) is a perfect example of all that. The way the installation is constructed is visible right away: everything is revealed, nothing is hidden, there is no trickery. One can rapidly understand the technical nature of the piece, how it's been made. But that awareness doesn't take away the magical effect of the light. There are a lot of elements in my work that evolve beyond reasoning. To reveal the way a piece is made—the process—becomes a means to include the one looking, to create some sort of proximity to and complicity with him or her. And I like to show the gallery space and what's in it as having been made by some human being, not by a machine. I tend to push that aspect a lot — the stains, the fingerprints and the casual craftsmanship — because it puts aside the possible authoritarian nature of the work. Even if those elements attract contempt, we now tend to despise the handmade object unless it looks manufactured. Having the viewer participate is a way to have them give up their protected status as a viewer. In the case of my installations, having them climb, crawl and touch stuff is a way to redefine the relationship they have with the artwork. The whole thing becomes a bit more involved, to the point of sometimes becoming overwhelming and scary.

**SH** But there are also your more buoyant integrated environments with composition, light and audience participation, which are quite different and, in a sense, allow for a greater erasure of authorship — such as the dance floor, *Position Yourself in a Network of Possibilities* (2006), which you did for the 2006 edition of *Nuit Blanche* in Toronto. You have said that in your

work there are often obscured passages that are revealed over time, and which function to unleash a series of impressions experienced by the viewer/participant in stages. I like this play with the idea of obscured passages, the use of the word “passage,” as in a passage of music, but also the way this plays quite literally in much of your installation process, where access to the interior of the piece is often obscured, narrowed or difficult. For instance, from the outside, *J'ai entendu un bruit* looks like a room built out of drywall, requiring the viewer to squeeze along a narrow passage to enter into the heart of the piece, which consists of a built play of light piercing through wood and drywall that creates a feeling like the starry night sky. And in *Satellites* (2006), the viewer cannot access the interior at all: the life-size rooms have no entrance and spin slowly around their own axis. The viewer is shut out.

**SRB** I always try to push my work as a visual artist, drawing on what I understand of performing arts and vice versa. The idea of creating large, immersive architectural installations comes from my experience as a composer and musician. Music can only be experienced, and therefore understood, as a progression through time. Elements get revealed over time, linearly. From my understanding of music, I wanted to create the same kind of experience through architectural installations, where elements of a piece appear to you one by one as you walk through the structure. The 2005 version of *The Monologue* (*Contempt and Seduction*) involved going through the gallery's washroom in order to access the apartment-like installation, which consisted of three rooms. But it's not always the same. The dance floor, *Position Yourself*, is a bit different, as I did not create an enclosed site. On the contrary, it was an attempt to turn a typically hidden environment into a site for a visible community. It was also important that the piece could be experienced in various ways. In that respect, people could dance on the sculpture or simply look at the progression of the light patterns as one looks remotely at any sculpture. It was a piece about openness, eclecticism and pluralism. It appeared formally monolithic but the musical selection shot all over the place, going from NWA to William Parker to Blood on the Wall to Bach. This environment gave me the chance to witness unlikely events such as a group of strangers



Samuel Roy-Bois, *À l'instant où nous nous sommes retrouvés*, 2003, wood, commercial carpet, Sonopan, musical instruments, electric lighting, microphones and speakers, 3.66 × 3 × 2.4m  
PHOTO: Stephane Lalonde

Samuel Roy-Bois, *I heard a noise and I ran*, 2003, dry-wall, wood, electric lighting and paint, 4.88 × 3.66 × 2.41m  
PHOTO: Recorder

line-dancing on Philip Glass' *Music in Fifths* (1969)!

**SH** How much does the conceptual framework create the scaffolding for that kind of improvisation and randomness?

**SRB** Improvisation in visual arts obviously does not function in the same way it does in performing arts. You can always fix a bad sculpture, but not a bad performance. I like to leave room for new impulses and spontaneity, but I totally rely on the strength of conceptual premises, not so much with suffocating rigour, but rather in a sort of makeshift conceptualism. As with many artists from my generation, I do not feel the need to promote a unique line of thought or a specific aesthetic ideology. What I try to push forward is a little more vaporous. I love to think that there is some dream-like or nightmare-like quality to what I do: a place where haze and concrete meet. I feel good when there is some randomness. And when this is successful, it definitely becomes a way out, a strategy to escape some deeply rooted psycho-cultural patterns. When it's not successful, it's just the repetition of old ideas with a false impression of novelty.

The theatre project I was involved with at PME, *Unrehearsed Beauty / Le Génie des autres* (2002), could have looked like an hour and a half of chaos, but it was a highly structured piece with a strong political agenda. The unpredictable aspect of the work came from the fact that the audience could intervene as they wished, at any time during the performance. The show got hijacked several times by angry spectators disappointed with what they came to see, disagreeing loudly with our conception of theatre. It strangely felt healthy.

**SH** Again, this struggle with open environments and its duet with control, which creates rhythmic patterning. I brought up the idea of scaffolding because of the way the bass, which you play, holds the pattern together, it being one half of the rhythm section. There is a cosmological aspect to the binary of control and open systems also evident in some of your installations where you constructively seek to emulate satellites, or the stary night sky, or lure the audience with the pulsing dance floor. It is a kind of seduction of the daydream that works against the way you expose the elements of your work's construction.

It is a precarious yet successful balance; the viewer does not forget that they are in a built environment, but is able to engage the experience in spite of this.

**SRB** I guess for a lot of people electric bass is a funny instrument to pick up. It's that thing in the back, played by the guy who is desperate to join a band and goes for the easiest instrument. But it has always been the instrument I wanted to play (and I started to play music late, at 20). I guess I like it simply because it's omnipresent and enveloping. My installations often function in the same way, as surroundings more than singled-out objects. You almost do not see them, they almost disappear. Although through my work I hope to create a sense of familiarity. But I like remoteness and I cherish distance. It allows room for truth and sincerity as much for me as for the one experiencing the work. During a talk he gave in Paris, Thomas Hirschhorn mentioned that he always tried to approach his work without cynicism or naïveté, and I felt very close to that philosophy. But then I had people stepping in my installations and asking me where the work was, and, perversely, I felt I had succeeded.

**SH** And what about what you call, "the transgressive quality of the handmade," and the contempt for the handmade?

**SRB** Today's ugliness is tomorrow's beauty. Early on, I decided not to bother with the beautiful, wishing that the quality of the experience of the work would turn my piece into a beautiful memory. The transgressive quality of the handmade is one thing. I like those low-profile kinds of transgressions. Like *Ghetto* (2006), which is a small room the size of a queen-size bed and in which one can lounge. Because the piece was in a museum, sleeping or simply lying down became a transgressive gesture. People would ask their friends to take pictures of themselves crouched in the sculpture, as a reminder of some absolutely silly activity, as if they were doing something like happy slapping. If I like that kind of gentle transgression, it's because it does involve politics in an unexpected manner, making it impossible to respond to it from either a partisan or apolitical point of view. You get deeply involved without realizing it, and somehow end up questioning the core of your own apprehension of the world.

**SH** What about the daydream of the object in your work? If you provide the scaffolding, the dais for the audience, how then does the environment create access to illumination or, to use your term, "infinite delimitation?" It's kind of a poetic oxymoron, the type embraced in Cubism, where the infinite is somehow not so infinite after all, anchored, or the anchored has infinite possibility of movement or expansion. This is another interesting tension in your work.

**SRB** The built environment is not simply a way to produce a necessary finitude, but also to expand one's mental spatial projection; abstracting the everyday experience of architecture is what appeals to me most. In my case, daydreaming is vital, not so much as a coping mechanism but as a necessary rebellious activity. My realistic approach is rooted in the desire to talk about the grandiose in mundane formal vocabulary. I like the anecdote about Pascal that says that after his carriage almost fell off a bridge, he had the constant impression that the void was located just next to him. He had to live with that fear daily. I have been thinking about that tale for a while as a metaphor for our difficult relationship to the infinite and how one handles the unknown.

**SH** Is there any point where the poetics of your work fall into the romantic for you? I am thinking particularly about the role of titles in your work. They create an interesting tension between the poetic and the transparency of construction, while also pointing towards what you refer to as the "disappearance of the installation," in the direction of the experience that the title suggests.

**SRB** My work is definitely poetic. But it is not romantic, not in itself. That said, I do feel that I work with the romantic aspect of contemporary life: the idealized view of reality and how it translates in the commodification of life experiences, the expression of utopian fantasies in common architecture, the choreographed mechanic of the everyday. And I do get to them at an angle, which could qualify me as a poet. I guess that turning all these aspects of reality into a void is a poetic approach. Most of my titles emerge from a distant impression of the piece. Often the title comes to me early on and it ends up guid-

ing the entire evolution of the work.

Strangely enough, people don't ask too much about the titles. I guess they are either under the impression that the titling is fully random, or they spontaneously build connections between what they see and the name given to a piece.

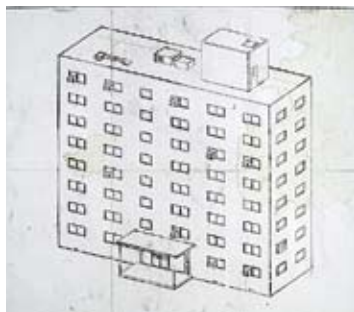
**SH** You refer to daily life through everyday building materials in your work, and yet it seems to have little or nothing to do with real lived-in space. Even the dimensions are escapist — and your architectural drawings are not in perspective, they are cartoonish, messy...

**SRB** A ceiling hanging just a little too low can produce a strange feeling of discomfort. You might not notice it at first, but it definitely gets to you and you might think that something is not right. I guess I like the bizarreness that comes from within real life, rather than from fantasy. To me it's more convincing. I have no interest in strictly recreating real spaces or anything that would be built to look like the absolute real thing. Evoking domestic spaces without mimicking them appears to me as a more empowering approach. As mentioned, utopian desires are often foundations to my installations, which, paradoxically, end up looking like dead ends or caves. I did a project a few years back documenting abandoned offices downtown in Manhattan right after 9/11. Some entire floors of what used to be prime locations were left entirely empty. All of the desks, chairs and dividers had been taken away, and the only traces left behind from years of work and collegiality were imprints of furniture on a roughed-up carpet. ♦

*Sydney Hermant is a Vancouver-based artist and writer of songs who occasionally writes about art. She met Samuel Roy-Bois in 2003 while curating at the Or Gallery, which she did from 2002 – 2005.*



TOP Samuel Roy-Bois, *Lost Hopes Squat*, 2007, mixed media, 6.1 x 2.1 x 2.1  
PHOTO: Blaine Campbell



BOTTOM Samuel Roy-Bois, *Habitations*, 2005, graphite on paper, wood and Plexiglass 122 x 96.5 x 7.6cm  
PHOTO: Guy L'Heureux



ABOVE Samuel Roy-Bois, *Position yourself in a network of possibilities*, 2006  
Wood, Plexiglas, electric lighting, sound system, MP3 player, dimmer and sound/light synchronizer, 16' x 16' x 8"  
PHOTO: Samuel Roy-Bois

BELOW Samuel Roy-Bois, *Le visible et l'invisible*, 2007, Wood, Plexiglas, commercial carpet, paint, 5' x 5' x 10'  
PHOTO: Samuel Roy-Bois

