

## **Free Speech: An Interview with Emmanuelle Léonard (Montréal)**

*Natalie Bussey (McGill University)*

**Natalie Bussey:** I wanted to start with your work *Le Beau et le Laid*, which was exhibited at the 2012 Quebec Triennial. I was hoping you could just describe the work in terms of its conception and its production.

**Emmanuelle Léonard:** It was made at Louise Trichet, a girls' public secondary school in east Montreal, and with the participation of Galerie Clarke, the Montreal Art Council and the Commission Scolaire. I was invited to work with this one class for one year, so I met with them maybe ten times. From these sessions we created an exhibition of photography that was shown at Maison de la Culture, for which the girls had produced their own photographs. The other part was my video work.

For the video I asked them to answer two questions: the first one was, what for you is a beautiful photograph? And the second was, what is for you a bad photograph? In the video I cut the part where I ask the question, so you only see the answer. The image is static and very simple, and the framing is always the same for each girl, about fifteen in total. [In each frame] only the face changes. It's between a portrait and a text. There are long moments where they don't talk—well they just physically talk, by movement, by the way they sit in front of the camera.

My background is photography and I came to video through photography. It responded to a need for speech. There is nonetheless something very photographic about the video—it is a fixed image, very basic black and white. Even the sound is very simple too—only their voice, in fact, with a little bit of ambient sound. There is something very photographic to

## FREE SPEECH

that.

**N.B.:** And also with the setting: the structure of the portraits, the front-facing position of the subjects. I was thinking about the concept of the Quebec Triennial in general, “Le travail qui nous attend”: in English, “the work that is in front of us.” In a sense it could also translate to “that which is facing us.” Sometimes that makes for some uncomfortable viewing because you are having this sort of encounter with the student in the video, as both subjects here are free from conventions of everyday interactions with people. In other words you are both free to stare, and it results in a mirroring of behaviours.

**E.L.:** Ah, yes the viewer would be kept in that same position, framed also.

**N.B.:** And it was interesting how sometimes a student would remain silent for quite a long time, just staring at the camera (and at you). It kind of fixed you on your spot.

**E.L.:** I asked them to wait a little bit to allow me to record the image. After a certain time I repeated the question and after just erased my voice. Or I gave them a signal that they could start. Sometimes they’re just thinking, trying to figure out what to say. The question is at the same time very simple and very complicated. The more you think about it, the more you say, well, that’s not...

When it came to talking about a photograph, the students tended to describe it in two ways: sometimes they talked about the image itself, on a more aesthetic level. For instance, “it is a bad picture when the light is bad,” etc. At other times they go through the image to the subject, like [a bad photograph] “is an awful man with scars,” something like that.

**N.B.:** Just to clarify, did they know the question beforehand, before they went to sit down? Or were they asked on the spot?

**E.L.:** They were asked on the spot. But they knew the theme was about beauty and ugliness, just not the specific question. When I first met them at first we talked about that more generally, [but our discussion] was not linked to the photographic picture.

**N.B.:** So over the ten times that you worked with them were you discussing mostly photography, or more abstract ideas of judging beauty and ugliness?

**E.L.:** Yeah, well I had to...I had several cameras and they made small groups and took pictures of different things, and after that I printed the images and they had to choose from them. And so the question of the beautiful or the ugly was from that process. But we didn't conceptualize it. It was really more practical.

**N.B.:** It says in the Triennial catalogue that your photographic and video work focuses on trying to represent public space. In your work *Statistical Landscapes*, for example, you gave workers from various labour sectors in Toronto a camera so that they could photograph their own work spaces.<sup>1</sup> So is this a bit similar to that, giving the students a camera and asking them to...

**E.L.:** Ah yes, for that process, yes. Well there was something...how can I say this...It was less surprising, more or less easy, this time.

**N.B.:** Because the young high school girl in Montreal is not a common subject. The school may be public in a technical sense, but it is not really open

## FREE SPEECH

to public purview. Following the idea driving *Statistical Landscapes*, is it still important for you to visualize or make visible these spaces?

**E.L.:** Yeah... maybe, yeah....Well I don't really want to go into that project. Like par hazard, donc ça a comme complexifié le processus donc rendu un peu plus difficile d'avoir suivi à plusieurs reprises mais ça c'est un peu anecdotique [I just switched back to French]. Alors c'est pour ça que les résultats, ils sont super-beaux, c'est super le fun ce qu'elles ont fait. Mais j'y ai pas pensé tellement, à ce terme-là, il faudrait que j'y repense.

**N.B.:** I want to go back for a minute to the responses [of the students] in the work. I was just thinking about when you yourself may be put on the spot, and how many times you've made an answer to a question that in retrospect makes no sense, or you say to yourself "actually that's not really what I think"...do you know...?

**E.L.:** I don't understand...

**N.B.:** For example, if you are asked a question similar to the question you asked these girls...sometimes you answer without thinking too much about it, or you are thinking too much about the camera or being in public. Sometimes your answer does not exactly reflect quite how you think. Or you say, that's not the answer I would give now. So I was wondering if you had that sense with them—if they were falling back on some easy answer, or that they were being sincere, or that there wasn't quite the language to describe their thoughts?

**E.L.:** It was very mixed: some were more linked to convention, I would say, and some were more surprising. Even if it is unconscious we try to give

people in front of us the answer we think they want. Even when it seems more linked to convention it says something about us. Us as a society.

**N.B.:** And the silences as well.

**E.L.:** Yes. One thing that surprised me was that there was often the question of the beautiful linked to cleanliness and a bad one was linked to dirtiness. This was surprising to me. And sometimes you have the idea of the beautiful linked to the conventional, too. At the end I was looking at them and saying wow, there is something opposite that appears. What is beautiful in these young girls is their difference. The fact that you always want to see the other one and to see how she will answer.

And the fact that the frame is still and nothing moves underlines the difference, the physical difference. The frame is so similar that you can compare: "Oh, there is another one who is a bit more *grande*, tall," etcetera, etcetera. And that came from the same frame. If the frame always changed you would not *remarquer* this so easily. And the fact that they are different really gives you the sense of their cuteness, or *attachant*.

**N.B.:** Their personality, or...

**E.L.:** Yes, but even physical personality. And that is something for me beautiful at the end. Not simply cute but touching.

**N.B.:** Did you find their personalities very different, on the camera as opposed to off?

**E.L.:** Yes, the camera is something that is...*autoritaire*. They are in front of a small desk, a classic rigid class chair, with two big spotlights; all this

## FREE SPEECH

apparatus is something kind of *autoritaire*. But at the same time, that's it. From there they can take all the time they want. If I did the same exercise myself, the beginning would be embarrassing but through time you can relax in that context. Of course the camera is always something that fixes you at the beginning. And after that you can forget.

**N.B.:** I was trying to make a link between your interest in forensics and photo documents culled from the judicial archives. *Le Beau et le Laid* fits the theme of the issue very well in the obvious way that these girls are talking on the video, but I was also thinking about a kind of interrogation going on, or an attempt for some disclosure or some kind of confession. It's also complicated because they do have the power to take their time...

**E.L.:** Yes, of course its...inevitable? That there is this aspect, even if you can find strategies to reduce, but for all of us in front of a camera asked to answer a question at the first level it would be that.

There is another piece I worked on that uses *polygraphes*. [*Le Polygraphe*, 2011]

**N.B.:** Polygraphs...Lie detectors?

**E.L.:** Yeah. [Opening up the file on her computer] I just want to show you the frames, there are three changes of the camera. But there [in *Le Polygraphe*] you really have this notion of being kept and obligated to answer. But I'm just thinking about the link between [the works]: [*Le Polygraphe*] was shown in the summer, made in the winter, at the same time as the video of the girls. I think there is something similar in the difficulty of finding a good answer—to find an answer. And what you see is the process of the search, more than the answer. Maybe I was more interested in the search for the

answer than the answer itself. And the lie detector is absolutely amazing for that question.

Because—do you want me to talk about this...?

**N.B.:** Yes!

**E.L.:** It's a nine minute video piece. The man you see is a real investigator. I met him and I asked if he would accept that I film it. And then I asked a woman to take a lie detector test. A lie detector exam always functions in the same way. You have three sets of questions, fifteen questions in all. About half are linked to what you want to know, and half that are used to create a kind of a *barème*, a kind of model that is used to understand how a person answers questions. The [latter] are questions such as, "Is today the 22nd of March?" "Are we in Laval?" Stuff like that. But sometimes they ask the person to lie. "Have you ever told a lie in your life? Say no." And so you are forced to say no. And from your reaction when you say "no," they are going to identify your "lying behaviour" which is used as a comparison when they ask the "real" questions.

For that video I only kept the questions [that form] the *barème*, the comparison questions, the absurd ones. Did you lie once in your life, say no. They want to say the truth, but cannot, the woman wants to tell the truth, but she cannot. So there is a certain anxiety created about how you can give the right answer. To give the answer you want and at the same time to give the truth. And that's not so far beyond the [Le Beau et le Laid], that's true. Give what they think we want, and give something *point*. Because it's a complicated question, in *Le Beau et Le Laid*. Here it's the same idea but its totally absurd.

**N.B.:** So they don't ask personal questions in the lie detector test

## FREE SPEECH

necessarily?

**E.L.:** He did the classical exam, the fifteen questions, but I only kept the comparison question. The investigator told me he worked with insurance companies. If somebody's house burned for example, the company wants to know where were you that night, was it you who caused the fire, etc. Because here in Quebec the polygraph exams are not accepted in court but police can use it to pressure someone. But they don't do it themselves, they hire private contractors. It's very interesting, there's some places in the United States where its accepted in court, but not here, not like that.

**N.B.:** And in all the movies. And was *La Déposition* attached to that work?

**E.L.:** *La Déposition* was another video, a similar work that was presented in the same exhibition. I had so much difficulty with that video! Maybe I can show it to you. [Opening video file]. This is a ten minute video. When I was looking for the police forensic photographs I finally found a way to get these photographs in the Pièces à Conviction...how do you say that in English...

**N.B.:** Like a Bureau of Convictions, or...?

**E.L.:** No, it's pieces of evidence that you can have access to in the archives of the courts. And the police photographs are in that box, as pieces of evidence. And what I realized when I was searching for that type of photography is that I never found any part of the *interrogatoire*. Nowhere! So I ask the police, can I have a part of the *interrogatoire*? Like when they have a suspect, a deposition in fact. Where are these documents? Where? We don't have access to them. By opposition you can have access to the evidence and photographs at the end of the justice process, [but] you cannot have access to the deposition or the

interrogation record. Because they don't want to reveal the way they conduct the interrogation...Maybe [the judicial system] doesn't want to have to give too many answers—I don't know. So, it's difficult.

So, I want to find a deposition. So I went to the Bibliothèque Nationale downtown and they have microfiches of a newspaper called *Photopolice*. *Photopolice* began in 1969 and closed in 1983 I think. It's a newspaper, a tabloid. The first years of its life were very interesting. When you look at them you feel they were linked—well, they are *near* the police, they had a lot of information about criminality, mafia; it was really a mafia theme. There were a lot of graphic pictures. You don't see those types of images any more. Do you know Weegee? He was a photographer in New York in the 1950s. He photographed crime scenes at night, well so it was that type of tradition.

So in *Photopolice*, like I said, you had the sense that they were near police information and had the start of the interrogation that the police fed them. And it's funny because I read them all, and in 1972 it stops, this type of information. You get the feeling that maybe they created a communication department within the police who said, "STOP giving them this material!"

I was interested in crimes committed by women, so I was using the part of *Photopolice* where women confessed their crimes. I didn't use the ones where the woman had killed her child, it's too...I used the ones where they killed their husbands. Of course it's very...I picked out three stories of women who killed their husbands, and of course it's always the same type of background. They are the criminals and the victim at the same time. And so I used some parts of each and I mixed the three stories, and you have the text [as subtitles]. And [you as the viewer] face the policeman, and he looks at you as though you are the criminal. I made some small changes to the wording. [Plays *La Déposition*.] These are all coming from *Photopolice* from the 1960s. The three

## FREE SPEECH

stories are quite the same in fact.

**N.B.:** And so mixing them up is a way of showing that they're essentially the same story?

**E.L.:** Yes, and of course here you have the same voice so you have the feeling of a unity even more so. It's for sure they're similar, these stories.

Born in 1971 in Montreal where she lives and works, artist **Emmanuelle Léonard** received her Bachelor's degree from Concordia University and her Master's in Fine Arts from the Université du Québec à Montréal. She has exhibited widely in both solo and group shows, including at the Musée d'art contemporain and the Mois de la Photo in Montreal, Expression in St-Hyacinthe, at the Mercer Union gallery in Toronto, at l'espace Glassbox in Paris, and L'œil de poisson in Quebec City. She has also been artist-in-residence at Villa Arson (France), at the Fondation Christoph Merian (Switzerland), and at the Finnish Foundation of Artists' Residencies. She is the 2005 recipient of the Pierre-Ayot Prize.

**Natalie Bussey** hails from Vancouver, where she acquired her BA at the University of British Columbia, and has been happily installed in Montreal since 2008. After completing an MA in Art History at McGill, she has continued into her PhD there. Central areas of interest include contemporary art and literature that address blindness as a facet of aesthetic phenomenology, Light and Space art of 1960s California, and the surge of "destination" architecture of arts institutions in particular. She writes art exhibition reviews for the Belgo Report, based in the Belgo Building in downtown Montreal. She

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is very pleased to be part of *Seachange* and would like to thank artist Emmanuelle Léonard for a candid and engaging interview.