

From Interview to Interrogation: The Rhetorical Frames of Talk in the Art of Emmanuelle Léonard (Montréal)

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When I was in kindergarten my class participated in making a time-capsule video, as we were the blessed children of the mercurial-sounding “Class of 2000.” Daryl Hadley’s dad worked the camera and Mrs. Bow sat us around the circular orange table in groups of four and conducted the interviews. The questions were standard: what is our favourite toy, what do we like to do on the weekend, what do we want to be when we grow up, etc. It was going fine until Mrs. Bow turned to me and asked, “What do you think is the most important difference between children and adults?” My reply: “When you’re little you can fit into little spaces and when you’re bigger you can go in bigger spaces.” I knew it was a terrible answer as soon as I heard the words come out of my mouth, but too late—it had been committed to both memory and VHS tape. I have never quite forgiven myself for this failure at both ingenuity and authenticity.

Montreal-based artist Emmanuelle Léonard’s work *Le Beau et le Laid*, presented at the 2012 Quebec Triennial at the Musée d’Art Contemporain, invokes this memory. The sixteen-minute black-and-white video consists of fifteen grade 9 girls, separately filmed, but with identical framing, responding to the same two questions: what is for you a beautiful photograph? And what is an ugly photograph? Sitting in front of the camera at a classic school desk, each student has her turn. Some fidget, some smile painfully, some stare silently for a disconcertingly long time. The viewer in the gallery is compelled to wait, to see what will happen next.

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There is a similarity to the set of conditions that staged my galvanizing experience and those of Léonard's video: the figure of authority who poses the question, the interviewee's fixed spot from behind a piece of institutional furniture, the camera. I can also see now that the respective questions posed were difficult: they were simple but not. In the attempt to answer them well, we—myself and these students—have revealed our desire, conscious or unconscious, to give the answer we think people want.

Léonard works within a tradition of conceptual art and contemporary photography, an approach inherited from the sixties and seventies, which questions the formal codes at play in documentation. As curator Gaëlle Morel has observed, “serialization, installation, the artist's apparent withdrawal, use of archive, aesthetic appropriation and a contemporary interpretation of historical uses of photography” are the framework for her process.¹ While courting the potential and desire for shocking, graphic and titillating revelations, an ethic of non-sensationalism runs through Léonard's oeuvre. Much of her earlier work has explored forensic photography, probing the documentary and probationary values attached to these images—for example, the photographic series *Une sale affaire* (2007) or *Homicide, détenu vs détenu, Archives du Palais du Justice de la Ville de Québec*, (2009). In such cases, the photographs and documents are taken from judicial archives after the case is closed and exhibited, unaltered, in the gallery. Aware of the formal applications of photographic media in the judicial system, Léonard uses this language to draw attention to the juxtaposition between the aesthetic neutrality of the images and the brutality of the violence that precipitated them.

¹ Gaëlle Morel, "Emmanuelle Léonard: A Judicial Perspective," in *Emmanuelle Léonard*, exhibition catalogue (Toronto: G44 Centre for Contemporary Photography, 2011), 9.

Police interrogation reports and depositions in the judicial archives—records of the ways in which talk shapes the proceedings of a case—have proven elusive in civilian searches. Instead Léonard has reopened the archive of the long-defunct Montreal crime tabloid, *Photopolice*, for material that has formed recent works such as *La Déposition* (2011). The video consists of a woman’s testimony for deposition before a police officer—or rather, three separate but similar testimonies, spliced together, and read by one voice. We, the viewers, occupy the same position as this polyphonic woman. Facing the dispassionate officer behind his desk, the woman’s elliptical story is further confused by his silent indifference. The communicative encounter between the voice-text of the woman and the officer thus destabilized, the deposition is almost impossible to follow, dissolving in the ever-greater chasm between two subjects: the police and everyone else.

Of Léonard’s method, curator Nicole Gingras has noted: “Maintenir une distance, garder à distance, trouver la *bonne* distance deviennent alors autant de stratégies de détournement du réel.”² The dimension of speech in *Le Beau et le Laid* in particular—the most direct and improvisational use of talk in her production to date—would appear to diminish the subjective distance that Léonard works to both underscore and reconstitute in her investigations of formal documentary coding. Further, the very live-ness and ordinariness of the young female students—far from the often invisible victims of violence that haunt forensic documents—as well as the presumed familiarity forged between them and Léonard over the course of the project, could build this suspicion further.

Yet my recollections of *Le Beau et le Laid* are not of the students’ answers

² Nicole Gingras, “Juste une image,” in *Emmanuelle Léonard: Juste une image*, exhibition catalogue (Saint-Hyacinthe: Centre d'exposition Expression, 2011), n.p.

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so much as the heightened sense of expectation I felt while observing their reactions and, from frame to frame, this subtle current of apprehension. Indeed, the long seconds in which Léonard's subjects "do nothing"—neither act nor speak—are arguably the most impactful and compelling moments in the video. That the spoken content is not necessarily the central object of interest here indicates a very particular subspecies of "talk."³ Moreover, if talk is often associated with dialogue, an exercise of listening, mediation and exchange, Léonard has here reduced that dynamic by removing her voice and thus the questions asked of the girls. The presence of the artist is therefore only implicit in the work; her intervention is the construction of the ascetic theatre within which it may occur.

The supplementarity of talk in *Le Beau et le Laid* is commensurate with its place within the rest of Léonard's oeuvre, which has, until her recent employment of video, been primarily photographic. The artist's incorporation and treatment of recorded speech is, however, consistent with her ongoing investigation into the use and organization of the documents, traces and indices by which our cultural and judicial systems try to apprehend truth. We might, therefore, understand talk as that which occurs within a strictly prescribed set of formal parameters. Framing "talk" in this way effects a concomitant awareness of the frame, or rather frames, that are at play. Thus we might more usefully think of "talk" as being integrated into the total constellation—as ungraspable as the concept may be—of the regulatory structures, desires, and perceived expectations that shape our communication.

If the search for the best, or the correct, answer is suggested in *Le Beau et Le Laid*, it is dramatized in another recent work of Léonard's, *Le Polygraphe*, in

³ Perhaps also a small gesture toward exoneration from my early offense.

2011.⁴ The video depicts a polygraph exam given by a Montreal professional to an elderly woman. The woman has been instructed in her responses, even given answers that are categorically and indisputably false (such as the wrong date or time). She wants to give the “right” answer, but cannot. Her discomfort reads in her facial expression and the beeping machines that are yoked to her body, formalizing the constraints and discomforts of being obligated to answer a difficult—rather, impossible—question properly.

The polygraph represents the truth-finding process in the negative: it is designed to catch the spoken lie in the involuntary reactions of the body. Of course, it is a “lie” that has already been identified by the authorities, and the questions already function to frame it as such. The outcome of *Le Polygraphe* is one in which there is nothing or almost nothing to see or to learn. The unconscious oracle of the polygraph machine, outside the camera’s field of vision, emblemizes the absence of empathy, curiosity and exchange in this search for the truth within the judicial system. The work, as curator Nicole Gingras articulates, “montre la relation professionnelle, aseptisée, volontairement distante et indifférente entre deux individus: le contrat qui les lie au mensonge. Aucune tension, aucune révélation, uniquement l’attente. Un vide, en fait.”⁵ Through the measurements of heart rate, sweat production and blood pressure, *Le Polygraphe* underscores, in a more literal way, the role of the body in communication. The conflict between giving the truthful answer and the prescribed answer registers as a quantifiable index. However, we must also concede that it is only within a scenario of intense scrutiny that the “truth” of body language ostensibly manifests itself. This inspires the question as to which anxiety-inducing force the body is actually reacting to, making

⁴ The work was exhibited at *Emmanuelle Léonard: Juste une image* at Expression, Centre d’Exposition de Saint-Hyacinthe, in 2011.

⁵ Gingras, “Juste une image,” n.p.

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expression *au-dela des mots* fundamentally contingent.

Describing the photograph of Walter Benjamin on the cover of an edition of *Illuminations*—a close shot of him apparently deep in thought—David Campany observes a correlation between the enigmatic nature of Benjamin’s internal experience and his own interest in the image. For Campany, moreover, the sense of arrested movement in the portrait of Benjamin is closely related to melancholy. Indeed, melancholy “has a very particular relation to photography more generally, because it is a state that exists on the threshold of self-performance and withdrawal, between social mask and nothingness, between theatricality and absorption. It is a condition not of the melancholic’s conscious making but it is experienced by them as a conscious condition. The melancholic is trapped in a kind of attenuated self-performance—alone but feeling regulated by the gaze of others, or by his or her own imaginary gaze at himself. The condition is lived from within and observed from without at the same time.”⁶

As Campany continues, the image of the adolescent embodies so many of the current paradoxes about photography: “the awkward fit between being and appearance; between surface and depth; between a coherent identity and chaos; [...] between muteness and communication; between absorption and theatricality; between stasis and narrativity; between posing and acting.”⁷

Léonard herself describes *Le Beau et le Laid* as something existing “between a portrait and a text.” Within the relative stillness of each frame there is still the implication of emotional and psychological activity—ultimately subjective and incomprehensible—beneath the surface of the

⁶ David Campany, “Posing, acting and photography,” in *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image*, edited by David Green and Joanna Lowry (Brighton: Photoworks/Photoforum, 2006), 111.

⁷ Ibid.

adolescent face and body. There is no reciprocal relation between body language and meaning, between speech and disclosure.

Viewing these girls seated uncomfortably at their desks, under the glare of lights and gazes, one is reminded of the pressure to say the right thing, the naive desire to please without knowing how. Indeed it is the *imperative* to speak, of making external what is internal, within this highly orchestrated theatre of truth that effects the greatest sense of the melancholic.

Fortuitously my interview with Léonard bore little resemblance to the kind of talk that has been produced in her video works. Linguistic differences played a significant role; our conversation was active and in constant pursuit of understanding and being understood. As the interview was conducted in English I must thank the artist, who is francophone, for the energy it must have demanded. Moreover the perpetual switching between French and English is a welcome, and timely, reflection of everyday encounters in Montreal.

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.

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