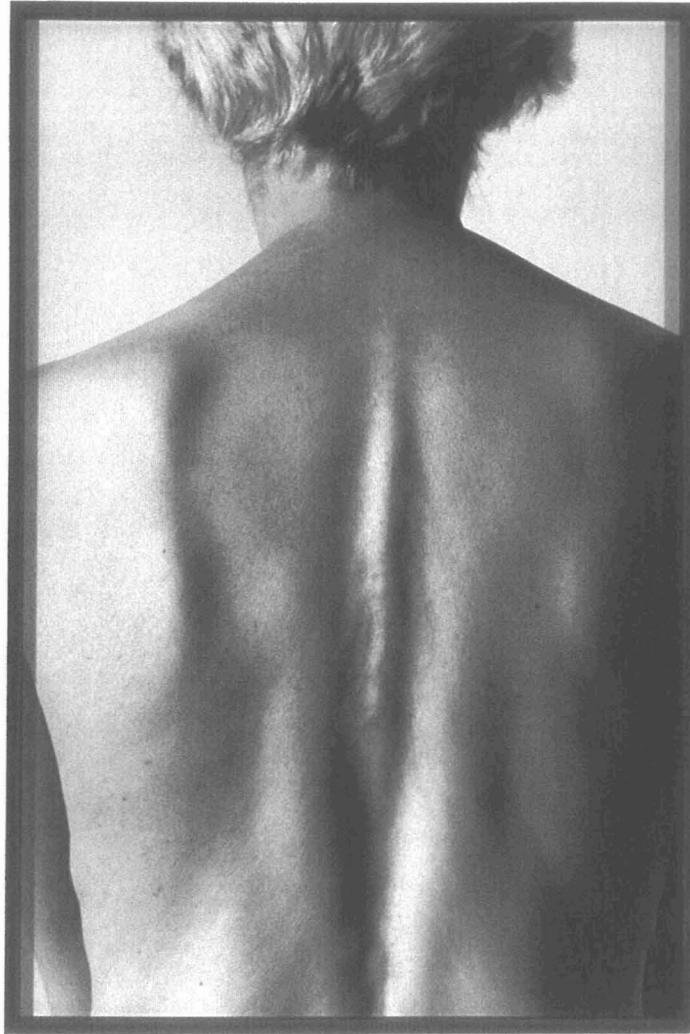


A Delicate Rupture



Susan Douglas

Visual Images and Verbal Stories

My discussion begins on three points, as follows:

Mais ce qui étonne, à Montréal, c'est la vitalité et la quantité d'art qui s'y produit, tant dans une discipline que dans une autre. Dans tout cela, il y a une émergence de qualité, un art foncièrement critique, informé, présent à la réalité contemporaine, loin de tout mimétisme ou provincialisme.

Montréal est donc une ville francophone et en cela beaucoup plus européenne que les autres villes du continent. Ses artistes sont depuis longtemps tournés tant vers l'Europe que vers les États-Unis tout en étant sensibles à leur propre spécificité culturelle. Américanité et européenité se conjuguent et produisent en art une approche qui distingue les pratiques montréalaises. **Chantal Pontbriand**¹

Today, whether or not as a result of the cultural complexity of its situation, the critical understanding of postmodernism in Montréal . . . hinges more on a notion of history and on the hybridization of genres than on the critical deconstruction stressed in Toronto. Nor has Montréal much of Toronto's self-conscious preoccupation with place. Rather, it has sought to represent itself in international terms, without, for all that, losing a sense of its identity. **Diana Nemiroff**²

[I] existe dans le champ des arts visuels, comme dans d'autres champs culturels au Québec, la littérature par exemple, une surconscience linguistique qui travaille la production, qui marque le lieu et qui n'est pas sans infléchir les modalités selon lesquelles la postmodernité visuelle a trouvé à s'y formuler. Dans leur prise en compte ou leur engouement pour les effets de langues, les codes de suppléance, les transferts esthétiques et les co-habitations disciplinaires, les oeuvres . . . sont animées d'un désir de traduction, voire de conversion, où le corps est souvent l'interface entre langue et vision, ou alors le dispositif qui secoue toute tentative de les concevoir comme régimes hégémoniques. **Johanne Lamoureux**³

When Pontbriand, Nemiroff, and Lamoureux write these sentences they speak to a view of Québec influenced by differences between Québec and English Canada. In all cases, the difference that marks Québec is one that distinguishes its situation as singularly postmodern. These authors present us with a perspective on Québec visual art that privileges the value of language, mobility and transience, that conceptualizes "hybrids" and figures "translation," takes stock of contemporary social reality, and envisions the possibility of a sense of community forged relative to debates that take place in the broader context of identity. In other words, a concept of difference is promoted that provides ways of theorizing disjunction and displacement without dismissing the appeal of the locative. Beyond accommodation, each of these texts frames, in providing a socio-political context, how we look at Geneviève Cadieux.

Exhibited from Tokyo to Sydney, Cadieux's work is included in the collections of Canada's most prominent institutions from coast to coast, among them the National Gallery of Canada, the Musée du Québec, and Montréal's Musée d'art contemporain. This would imply a double time of nation and culture pleated into her practice. The ambivalence that characterizes this double time is one that has allowed her work to represent any number of competing claims to cultural or national identity. At one moment, her work stands as a defining moment in Nemiroff's diverse presentation for the National Gallery of Canada (1989), at another, it embodies Canada at the 1990 Venice Biennale. Two years later, it will represent a socially responsible Québec for the exhibition *Pour la suite du Monde*. In 1991, the Musée d'art contemporain presented works from Québec, Canada, Europe, the United States and

Africa that “specifically engaged in political debates or social causes.” The catalogue essays of Manon Blanchette and Gilles Godmer both underscored the public, city-bound and world oriented discourse of the museal. Citing Michel Serres, Blanchette described the Musée’s function “as a beacon, as a guiding pole.” Her description seemed to play on *La Voie Lactée*, Cadieux’s bill-board sized translucent image of a woman’s rouged and parted lips set on the museum’s roof. Inspiring comparison to Man Ray’s surrealist *À l’heure de l’Observatoire — Les Amoureux* (1932–1934) and as strategically exaggerated, abstract, and consciously composed to overlap but never coincide with the close-up conventions of cinema, it might also be interpreted to refer to language and silence. If “*la voix lactée*” is read as referring to the specificities of voice, of a mother tongue silenced, rather than taken literally as “the milky way,” then that silence can be read as francophone. In the literature, this narrative seems to be avoided, or at least inadequately understood. Used on the cover of the exhibition’s publication, and hence representing the institution’s link to the larger social community, the image falls to the side of communication where its autobiographical dimension is revised and flattened to the museum’s globalizing rhetoric.⁴

By contrast, Cadieux brings historical specificity to Pontbriand, Nemiroff, and Lamoureux. These authors understand that Cadieux “speaks” not only for Québec but to Montréal within a more complex representational narrative whose terms are heterogeneity, identity, and visibility. In its linkage to postmodernity, within a spatialized projection of history foregrounding disjunctive synthesis, her site-specific practice accrues the value of a site in which time-worn and fixed distinctions between “here” and “elsewhere,” “regional” and “national,” or “home” and “away” in matters of the aesthetics no longer hold. Thus her practice achieves a key place in theorizing questions of location and context, community and identity in relation to the culture. Even so, the critical reception of Cadieux’s work points towards a certain definition of the national as a local refused. Representing the specific context of a québécois and Canadian postmodern, it paradoxically also claims international status for artists in Québec. It seems to me that such a confusion of categories, such a decentered figuration of “nation” insistently brought to the artist’s practice, raises interesting questions concerning the processes of selection, of the practices, discursive and non-discursive, constitutive of national identity both in Québec and Canada.

Translations

The act of visual representation, as Cadieux’s photographic practice, dramatizes productive tensions in what surrounds and positions the political economy of culture. What might be said, then, about “cultural identity” as a performative and analytical category by reference to the specificities of individual art objects such as these? Something of an oblique access is required to distinguish cultural identity from art practice. And, in this regard, Lamoureux might again be cited. Utilizing the figure of “translation” to speak generally to identity in the context of cultural production, specifically to art in Québec, she theorizes translation across and through discourse, time, and space in her text entitled *Seeing in Tongues/Le Bout de la langue: A Narrative of the Visual Arts in Québec*. What I want to retain from her discussion of Cadieux is how Lamoureux works across and through a field of sensoria enfolded in the notion of a visual *identitaire*, as the earlier citation makes clear. This metaphor of translation later gives way to the possibility of reading site-specificity against the grain. Hence the stress is on mining spaces-between: between discursive and non-discursive practices, between parallel and/or competing subjectivities, between affect and the Law, the Law of the Father, the Law of Nature, the Law of the Land. Socio-political geographies, with language, are transitively linked to the objects organized within them.

Making the connection between braille and visual representation in her analysis of Cadieux’s *À fleur de peau* (1987), Lamoureux perceives the potentialities of a shift of sensory registers. The formal



elements of this artwork are a clouded mirror and a silverized plate inscribed in braille with a quotation from Saint-Exupéry reading: “Here is the best portrait that, later on, I was able to make of him.” Language is linked to the given-to-be-seen as an “encounter” between sensual fields ex-centrally assembled. The objectivity and framing power of vision in contrast to concrete touching enables, in a mutual identification, a new awareness or change of state. Thus felt, the crucial element of Cadieux’s photographs is not so much what is visible in the image, but what might be apprehended in the movements between frames. I find that this theory sets up a provisional closure such that, in Cadieux’s later *La Fêlure, au chœur des corps* (1990) for instance, it will not only be the reflexive dimension of the spectator’s identification with lips and dermal surfaces that deserves close scrutiny, but also their division and in-complete separation which suggest that what has to be thought is a necessary plurality that was always already there, that is, an existence that has already been more than one in being dispersed. In its many forms Cadieux’s practice is an art of memory.

For Cadieux as for others in Québec, the question of a politics of identity is relativized by an international profile which throws into relief the discourses of others in matters of identity politics. Whereas outside Québec cultural difference might be productively worked as a system of meaning whose narrative positions a collective sense of liminality, Québec cultural identity tends to highlight the impossibility of images, languages and structures to disclose more than personal involvements. Québec art practices “trouble” nationalist discourses, even inside Québec. It makes little sense, then, to try and fit Cadieux into a framework that might imply any more than a temporary coexistence among cultural practices. The work itself makes evident that cultural geography is a contested term. Cadieux’s photographs intimate that we are transversed by memory, language, and representation in ways that we do not control. This has something to do with the fact that, as the traditional apparatus of realism, photography always marks an absence of the recorded. So that, when the photograph ratifies, as it does in Cadieux’s prints, a fictive discourse, it confirms that “art’s ability to make political statements is tied to the context in which it is produced and/or shown.”⁵ *Portrait de famille* (1991) helps to make this point clear. The work consists of an environment made up of three close-up images in sizeable dimensions dedicated to father, mother and daughter. The photographs are intimate portraits: strikingly pictured with their eyes closed, each subject is backed by sections of the body. The visual strategy of superimposition, actual as in the father’s allotted case where the play is between the daughter’s lips and the father’s torso, implicit in the others, expresses the problem of inclusion and connection. It seems to me that Cadieux touches on Homi Bhabha’s definition of culture as “symbol-forming” and “subject-constitutive.” This symbol-forming and subject-constitutive culture operates through processes of relation to itself.⁶ New and unexpected articulations result from the conjunction of forces, forms, and signs produced in different locations in space and time. Thus, in offering the critical possibilities of a theoretical and even temporary conjunction, Cadieux focuses attention on a notion of spaces between and hence on productive resonances destined to challenge the frontiers and boundaries that make up discourses. Cultural identity is in this sense an interpolative practice.

A Body of Work

Hesitant before the image, Cadieux’s viewer is forced to reflect. In Cadieux, bodies exist as texts, surfaces, performances whose effects betray an exploration of conceptual shifts manifest in all manner of visual partitions and seriations. What is at issue is a range of cultural contradictions. Hence the unspecified interlocked mouths and marks upon the skin of *La Fêlure*... denote more than a displacement of real existence, and is at odds with essentialist notions of linguistic or territorial propriety. Like *Trou de mémoire, la beauté inattendue* (“memory gap, an unexpected beauty,” 1988), it calls to mind a proliferation of associations determined by the dynamics of the aesthetic field. In general, the artist’s



preoccupation with scars and skin promotes the sense of a taste for fluctuation, transformation, and change, functioning as well to draw attention to the physical features that distinguish entities from one another. A crucial element is constituted by the structures of a figured body twisted and bent. Refraction and distortion causes us to see differently in the taint of the mirror to one side of *Trou de memoire*. . . , an image that is simply that of the trace of a wound, in Pontbriand's view, a scar in "field of skin and hair," "part of one's field of gravity" a mark of "the passage from life to death."⁷ What I notice is that instead of the fulcrum breaking the exposition created by the work, it produces, as it were, a new illusion. "The skin is a sensitive surface which reveals and retains information much like a photograph," the artist has said.⁸ Aided by analogies between the photographic process and the productivity of language in the mechanical reproduction of memory drawn by the artist herself, Cadieux has constructed a tantalizing play on visibility and invisibility, enveloping them architecturally in a way that makes them unstable and confusing. Her arrangement folds into the idea of a fragmentation of the body and its environment along the line of an apprehended eye that mimes the mobile effects of referentiality. What the scar's form produces is an elliptical curve whose very abstraction enables a crisscrossing from two dimensionality into three. And a return. What is exposed is a sense of cultural contradiction. At one level, the blemish can be read as the scripting of a personal narrative applied as writing on the flesh. This mark is graphic in the sense that graffiti is, as a signature or a tag produced to lay claim, a movement of and in extension whose furtive inscription ritually maps initiation. Scars so function in the culture; in the rhetorical surface that is skin, scars take on the social form of initializing the body as a battleground. The experience can be potentially disruptive, or not. Cadieux's scars are interstitial. And, in so far as they create meaning scars trail off into a fundamental sense of difference. Thus, in the very moment that they are enlarged, and in particular when they are transferred into the museum context, they become a surrogate for the other. This identity that is uncertain, something cultural, is the object of desire and of the gaze.

What is being touched on in Cadieux's work is the alliance of pain and the erotic. Skin is the site of excitation and pleasure, and also of the distortions and magnifications of suffering, pain, anxiety, of the minutely infinite in language's scale of reference. So they appeared in cinematic and generative form in *Voices of Reason/Voices of Madness* (1983), an installation that explored the transition between psychological states by means of the infiltration of sights and sounds set in a darkened enclosure, and again in *Parfum* (1991). Enveloped by the two dimensional system of the diptych, in this work Cadieux presented a metaphor of skin exuding. The fluids expunged are tears and perspiration, and in other representations (*Blues*, 1992, *Le Corps du ciel*, 1992, for example) cellular codes, and blood: such figurative *maculae* or stains form a loose link from the inside to the outside. Utilizing these elements more literally, *Rubis* (1993), precisely blocks out the impossibility of securing notions of subjectivity in exacting archival detail as it contrasts an aspect of a woman's back, metaphor for the "other," with close-up analysis of melanoma. Reworking one half of *Rubis*, *Sans Titre (Dos)* (1994) repeats this strategy, forcing beholders to question the ways in which positions are invested with meaning. Precise markers, then, such as nipples (*Sans titre [Sein]*, 1994) explored by Cadieux through the use of magnification and dislocation, are destined not to reaffirm but to rethink dominant conceptualizations of interiority and exteriority. This meeting ground is made still more explicit in *Le Corps du ciel* (1992), in which the shift is from the macroscopic to the microscopic. Here magnification traces the notion of a universal scale of variance in nature. The incommensurability of finite parts, represented by a bruise, on one side of a double representation, turns on the contrast with a complex whole signified by the picture of a clouded sky. To conjure the relation between them all that is necessary is a mediation on cultural traffic and the modalities of physical traffic and, in particular, some reflection about national formations relative to critical interpretation. It seems to me that far from closing down meaning in being an exemplary Québec artist, Cadieux presents the possibilities of being



an artist-in-Québec. Once again, the figure of disjunction emblemized by the two perspectives of Cadieux's stereoscopic view brings a third dimension into view. Its form comes to call into question a world-picture in which the indefinite, the flexible, and extension do not exist.

What is revised, then, is a point of view that cannot be localized. Imprinted on their photographic surfaces, Cadieux's pictures afford the conditions of the periphery, of possibility, and at the same time of contestation, conditions that speak to the complexities of national identity. In its articulation of unexpected conjunctions with the rhetorics of displacement, instability, and transience, such as those that appear insistently in the technologically magnified bodies and subjectivities her images present, Cadieux's work drives a wedge between identity as a secure ground from which to speak, and identity as the basis for exclusions, limits, and omissions. In this interval between the stability of identity and identity defined as limitation, the political stakes of the equation of culture/language/identity might emerge with all its force.

Notes

1 Chantal Pontbriand, *La Ruse Historique: l'art à Montréal/The historical ruse: Art in Montréal* (Toronto: The Power Plant, 1988), 13. The translation provided on page 9 of this text reads:

"The astonishing thing about Montréal is the vitality and quantity of art that is produced in all disciplines and from all this activity, true quality is emerging: art that is basically critical, informed, in tune with contemporary reality, and, far removed from all mimicry and provincialism. Montréal is a francophone city, and thus much more "European" than the other cities on this continent. For ages, its artists have turned to Europe for inspiration as often as to the United States, while maintaining an awareness of their own cultural specificity."

2 Diana Nemiroff, *Canadian Biennale of contemporary Art/Bienale Canadienne d'Art Contemporain* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1989), 84.

3 Johanne Lamoureux, *Seeing in tongues/Le bout de la langue; a narrative of the Visual Arts in Québec* (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 1995), 19. The translation provided on page 39 of this text reads:

"[I]n Québec, visual art and the other cultural fields (literature, for example) are permeated by a heightened awareness of language that has left significant traces on what is produced, and influenced ways in which postmodernism has come to be articulated. In their attentiveness to (or fondness for) the effects of language, for supplementary codes, aesthetic transfers and disciplinary couplings, the works . . . are inspired by a desire for translation (or indeed conversion) in which the body is either the interface between language and vision, or the apparatus that undermines all attempts to conceive of them as hegemonic regimes."

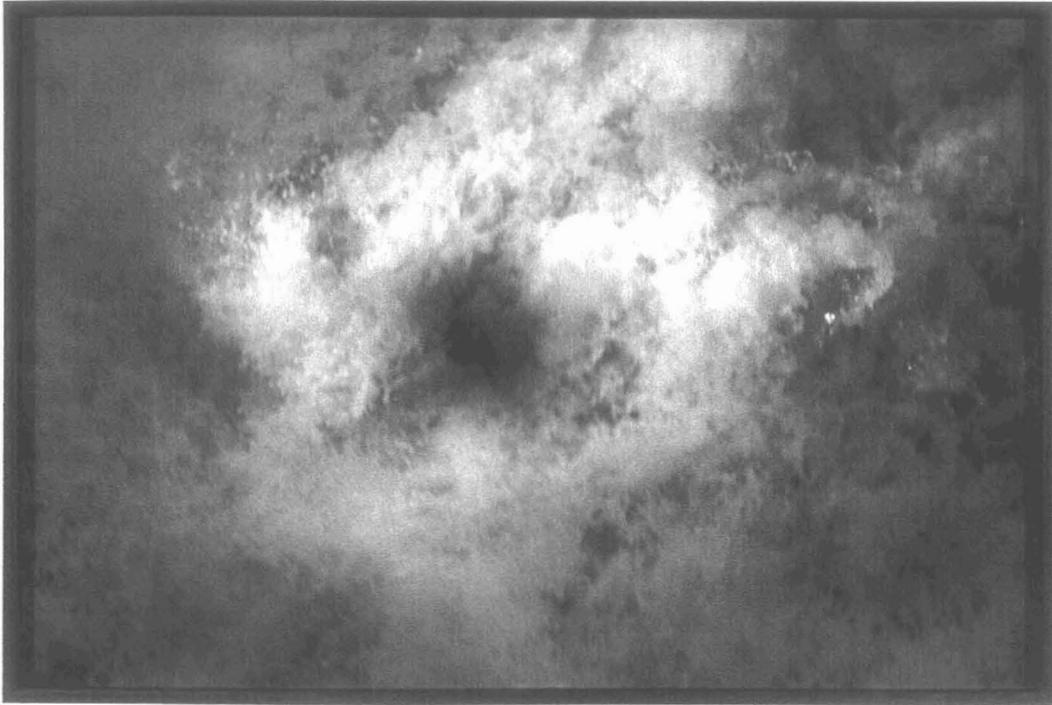
4 Manon Blanchette in Gilles Godmer and Réal Lussier, *Pour la suite du Monde* (Montréal: Musée d'art contemporain, 1992), 236, 247.

5 Sheena Gourlay, "Geneviève Cadieux and Discourses on Representation," unpublished paper.

6 Developing this idea, Bhabha writes: "[C]ultures are only constituted in relation to that otherness internal to their own symbol-forming activity which makes them decentred structures — through that displacement or liminality opens up the possibility of articulating different, even incommensurable cultural practices and priorities." See "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in J. Rutherford, ed, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 211.

7 Chantal Pontbriand, "Geneviève Cadieux," *Pour la suite du monde*, 68.

8 Cited in Ann Duncan, "The Realm of the Senses," *The Gazette*, 3 April, 1993, 5.



Main images

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Sans titre (sein), 1994: Geneviève Cadieux

Colour print, 90,3 x 133,3 cm

Page 111

Sans titre (dos), 1994: Geneviève Cadieux

Colour print, 90,3 x 138,3 cm

Above

Circles of Sorrow, 1995: Geneviève Cadieux

Colour print, 95,5 x 138,3 cm

Photographs: Richard-Max Tremblay

Courtesy: Galerie René Blouin, Montréal