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REFERENCES

Françoise Sullivan : trajectoires resplendissantes = Radiant Trajectories, Montréal : Galerie de l'UQAM, 2017

Françoise Sullivan, Montréal : Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2018. Sous la dir. de Mark Lanctôt

- 1 Françoise Sullivan's name is perhaps still little known outside Canada, but the rich and multi-faceted work of this artist, who is nothing less than a monument—still very much alive and kicking—in the history of Canadian art, deserves special attention well beyond the borders of the country she was born in. Through the avant-garde nature of her multi-disciplinary praxis, she and her work have had a significant effect on both the visual arts and dance, in their modern and contemporary expression alike. Françoise Sullivan is a dancer, choreographer, performer, painter, sculptress, conceptual artist, poet and author, well-known as one of the signatories of the *Total Refusal* (1948) manifesto. As such, she is an artist who invariably evolves where she is least expected, tirelessly thwarting the easiness of doing and making in her different trajectories.¹ Her work, which has been widely disseminated throughout her career, has enjoyed particularly enthusiastic attention over the past decade, with a dozen or so exhibitions and publications devoted to her. The recent update provided by the two catalogues published by the Galerie de l'UQAM and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Montreal invites us to demonstrate how the artist's hugely varied oeuvre and her constant refusal to reconcile herself to any kind of label upset the patriarchal doxa that has traditionally placed things feminine outside the art arena.
- 2 Because Françoise Sullivan's activity has encompassed dance, sculpture, Conceptual Art, and figurative and then abstract painting, following a certain chronological path, she is rarely studied from the particular angle of any one medium. The theoretical and

critical reception of her work also contributes to highlighting interplays of linkage between her different artistic explorations, which, on the face of it, may seem antagonistic. “[T]he breaks were never definitive”, writes Vincent Bonin, explaining that “reflections and motivations” in Françoise Sullivan’s work persevere through time and “despite the changes”.² So we can observe the tendency among those authors who broach the artist’s work to identify what, with regard to one medium, is expressed within another. While Louise Déry is interested in the conceptual phase of Françoise Sullivan’s work, she also emphasizes the active thinking which runs through her whole output, be it danced, performed, choreographed, or painted.³ In a similar way, Mark Lanctôt, who explains “how can the presence of painting be *traced* in the rest of Sullivan’s practice”,⁴ is unable to refrain from observing the “expressionist dimension present from the first sculptures”,⁵ which, placed straight on the floor, turn it into a “stage”. Noémie Solomon, for her part, makes the point that dance “is present throughout Sullivan’s body of work, whatever the period or medium—from painting to choreography, sculpture, conceptual and performance art, and to her later return to painting”.⁶

- 3 But over and above the simple motifs which emerge and re-emerge from one medium to the next, one of the bonding agents of Sullivan’s praxis is undoubtedly “her biographical mooring”, to borrow the words of René Payant; a mooring which, far from toppling over into the anecdotal, according to Patricia Smart, is displayed by the “artist’s *presence* in her oeuvre”.⁸ The affective content of her work and its undeniably feminist substance are a result of this (without ever being explicitly called as much by the artist), associated as they are with her reality as a woman, artist, and mother of four children. The same goes for her tireless desire for freedom, and her unflagging love of art. Françoise Sullivan may have never laid claim to the description as a feminist, and she may have always refused to be identified as a woman artist,⁹ but we can nevertheless see her constantly shifting activity as a categorical refusal to be limited to gender stereotypes. To retrace Françoise Sullivan’s lengthy artistic career, it seems essential to return to the genesis of her professional praxis during the 1940s, when she was still a student. At the time, if there were more young women than men studying at the Montreal School of Fine Arts, that was, by the director’s own admission, because they were being trained not to become professional artists, but to ready themselves for domestic life. Like several of her colleagues, Sullivan rejected that simplistic role, at a very early stage. In a text titled “La Peinture féminine”, published in 1943 in the student paper, *Le Quartier Latin*, she questioned the place of women in painting. That essay, which appeared a few years before Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, when the artist was just twenty, conveyed a certain essentialist conception of women’s pictorial production—a vision that she would subsequently turn her back on throughout her career—, but we can nevertheless see in it the birth of an assertive rejection of the idea that artistic genius is just something inevitably male.
- 4 Won over by the avant-garde ideas put about by the painter Paul-Emile Borduas, Françoise Sullivan joined the Automatist movement, a group of radical artists keen to break with State Catholicism, where censorship was applied to every social sphere, and permitted no more than a purely academic line of art teaching. As illustrated by the *Total Refusal* manifesto, which caused a scandal among the powers-that-be when it was published on 9 August 1948, by way of their output the aim of those artists was to decompartmentalize art and free it from its academic straitjacket. Using “the critical coefficient of a poetic gesture that became one of the signifiers of the verbal language,

self-assertion and emancipation of the Québécois as a people”¹⁰, they were also trying to extricate the whole of society from the social and cultural obscurantism in which it was plunged. Adding her name alongside fifteen other signatories—six of them women—to the eponymous essay written by Paul-Emile Borduas, Françoise Sullivan also contributed to the manifesto in the form of an essay titled *La Danse et l'espoir* [Dance and Hope], in which she appealed to readers to turn their backs on the “old-fashioned methods” of classical dance, and “reactivate the surcharge of expressive energy stored in that marvellous instrument, the human body.”¹¹ According to Noémie Solomon, that “political manifesto of embodiment”¹² is regarded by Iro Tembeck as one of the first ground-breaking texts of modern dance in Quebec.¹³

- 5 Although Françoise Sullivan was involved with painting during the 1940s, it was by way of dance—encouraged, among other things, by her training in Franziska Boas’s studio in New York—that she would help to bring the Automatist gesture to the fore. Her choreographic project of improvised dance about the cycle of the seasons became iconic because of her own performance titled *Danse dans la neige* [Dance in the Snow] (1948), immortalized by the photographs of Maurice Perron. In them we see Françoise Sullivan dancing in a harsh winter landscape, with a lunar look about it, in which, based on her own words, she adopted the posture of a “surveyor”, responding with her entire body to the ups and downs of the terrain made up of “steep, rough slopes of rocky snow”.¹⁴ Through this proposal “deterritorializing dance”¹⁵, far from traditional places for producing and reproducing dance, Françoise Sullivan openly kept her distance from classical dance “where the female dancer is supported by a male dancer whose function is to emphasize her passive beauty”.¹⁶ From *Dédale* [Maze] (1948) to *Et la nuit à la nuit* [And Night to Night] (1981), by way of *Droit debout* [Standing Upright] (1973), all Sullivan’s dances—and we have named just a handful—are based on movement and sometimes on motionlessness to introduce empowered and mainly female bodies.
- 6 After successfully devoting herself to dance for several years, it was by way of sculpture that the artist pursued her artistic quest in the 1960s. That medium for which she took over the family garage, turning it into a studio, enabled her, by her own admission, to work while keeping an eye on her four boys. The fact that, while keen to reconcile her life as a mother and her life as an artist, Françoise Sullivan opted for a medium that was radically different from dance, and not historically associated with exclusively female activities (such as embroidery, which several overtly feminist artists would practice), also seems to be telling with regard to her career, free of any unforeseen circumstance. Her imposing welded metal sculptures (*Chute concentrique* [Concentric Fall], 1962), calling to mind a dancing body, although they are determinedly abstract, then her spiralling sculpture made of Plexiglas (*Spirale*, 1969), earned her recognition as an artist—period, without the added epithet “woman”—in the field of modern sculpture in Quebec and Canada.
- 7 Just when several women artists of the 1970s would set their sights on an openly militant and activist art, Françoise Sullivan’s praxis veered towards Conceptual Art. That conceptual exploration, which took shape by way of photography, performance and writing, gave rise to more obviously political works which were, up to a certain point, more laden with affects. So when Mary Kelly developed her *Post-Partum Document* project (1973-1979), using documents to explore her mother-son relation, Françoise Sullivan came up with different works referring to her life and her sons. In *Dimension*

des enfants [Children's Dimension] (1970-1971), as if to mark the passage of time, she transcribed on the four sides of a gallery column the increasing heights of her four boys, since the birth of her last son. In *Travaux d'Italie* [Italian Works] (1973), she exhibited various personal *souvenirs*, only visible at a distance through the holes in a boarded-up gallery window. For the photographic diptych *Portraits de personnes qui se ressemblent* [Portraits of People who Look Alike] (1976), using an interplay of *liaisons*, she brought together a reproduction of the picture *Portrait d'un jeune homme* [Portrait of a Young Man] by Lorenzo Lotto (1480-1556), and a school portrait of her son Francis. Her more politically involved conceptual works gave rise to her diptych 1975, *Année de la femme 1975, année sainte* [1975, Year of the Woman, 1975, Holy Year] (1975). That work, consisting of a mosaic of postcards depicting saints and a painting made with the artist's menstrual blood, made reference to the Church's many different injunctions and interdictions concerning the sexual and reproductive anatomy of women. Latterly, if Françoise Sullivan's current research shows a renewed interest in painting, the artist has been working against the grain since the 1980s, amidst the emergence of new artistic practices and methods. We can read the artist's espousal of the title of painter as the ultimate claim to a creative space which, even among the Automatists,¹⁷ had been mainly appropriated by men. The multiple exploration of identities and the shattering of boundaries between disciplines—two principles around which contemporary art has developed—lie at the very heart of the artist's career. While casting a backward-looking glance at the entirety of her output, Françoise Sullivan reckons that everything she did comes from painting, but those who examine her pictorial work find *something else* in it. For example, by referring to the monumental picture *Hommage à Paterson* [Homage to Paterson] (2003), Mark Lanctôt underscores the "performative nature of the painting", which summons the ghostlike presence of the person for whom it was intended (the painter Paterson Ewen, father of the artist's four children, who died the year before the work was produced). Louise Déry, for her part, expounds the fact that "[Sullivan] works the pictorial body not as a window on the world but as a scene where thin coats and tiny touches bring about the advent of painting through its performative theatricality."¹⁸ If Françoise Sullivan's multi- not to say trans-disciplinary praxis is rooted in biography, we can nevertheless say that her changing *presence*, at once radical and discreet, acts as a lever for imposing—far removed from anything traditional—her own subjectivity in the field of art.

NOTES

1. Here I borrow the word used by Louise Déry, director of the Galerie de l'UQAM and curator of the exhibition *Françoise Sullivan : trajectoires resplendissantes = Radiant Trajectories*.
2. Bonin, Vincent. "When the Painting Didn't Matter: Questions Asked and Answered by Françoise Sullivan During the Parenthesis of Conceptual Art", *Françoise Sullivan*, Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2018, p. 247
3. *Françoise Sullivan : trajectoires resplendissantes = Radiant Trajectories*, Montreal: Galerie de l'UQAM, 2017

4. Lanctôt, Mark. "Once More with Feeling : Françoise Sullivan and Expressionism", *Françoise Sullivan*, op. cit., p. 194
5. *Ibid.*, p. 178
6. Solomon, Noémie. "The Extemporaneous Dance of Françoise Sullivan", *ibid.*, p. 219
7. Payant, René. "Sullivan plutôt que Borduas", *Spirale*, no.22, February 1982, p. 8-9
8. Smart, Patricia. *Les Femmes du Refus global*, Montreal: Boréal, 1998, p. 271-272
9. Guérin, Annie. *Françoise Sullivan : sa vie, son œuvre*, Toronto: Institut d'art canadien ; Art Canada Institute, 2018, online: <https://www.aci-iac.ca/francais/livres-dart/francoise-sullivan>
10. Bonin, Vincent. *Op. cit.*, p. 248
11. Sullivan, Françoise. "Dance and Hope", *Trajectoires resplendissantes*, op. cit., p. 204-209. A lecture given by Françoise Sullivan on 16 February 1948, originally published in *Le Refus global* (edited by Paul-Emile Borduas et alii), Saint-Hilaire: Mirtha-Mythe, 1948, pages 116-117.
12. Solomon, Noémie. *Op. cit.*, p. 220
13. Tembeck, Iro. *Danser à Montréal : germination d'une histoire chorégraphique*, Sillery: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1991
14. Sullivan, Françoise. "Danse dans la neige : un récit" (February 2018), *Françoise Sullivan*, op. cit., p. 215
15. Solomon, Noémie. *Op. cit.*, p. 222
16. Smart, Patricia. *Op. cit.*, p. 86
17. See: Arbour, Rose Marie, "Le Cercle des automatistes et la différence des femmes", *Etudes françaises*, vol. 34, no.2-3, 1998, p. 157-173
18. Déry, Louise. *Op. cit.*, p. 102

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Ariane De Blois has a PhD in art history from McGill University. For the past fifteen years or so she has been teaching, as well as being actively involved in contemporary art circles. She is also an author, art critic and freelance curator. Between 2014 and 2018 she was part of the editorial board of the review *Esse arts + opinions*, and her writings have been published in various magazines (*Esse arts + opinions*, *Espace art actuel*, *Etc*, *Spirale*). Her curating projects have been presented at, among other venues, the Havana Biennial, the Stadtgalerie in Bern, and the Centro Nacional de las Artes in Mexico City. She is currently working on a retrospective show of the COZIC duo, which will be on view in autumn 2019 at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Quebec.