

**Disposition & Duality:  
Notes on Marie-Claire Blais & Pascal Grandmaison's  
*La Vie Abstraite*  
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“La Vie Abstraite”, by Marie-Claire Blais & Pascal Grandmaison, Galerie René Blouin (Montréal, 5 March - 23 April 2016)

Composed of two parts, the multi-channel video-installation *La vie abstraite* explores no less than the very heart of cinematic art. Addressing the two basic criteria that moving images share with reality – namely, time and space – the artwork offers a poetic meditation on the threshold between cinema and life. The arrangement designed at Galerie René Blouin in Montréal perfectly encapsulated such a sense of duality, developing an atmosphere of liminality, which was also conveyed by the beautifully evocative images on screen.

The reading of the artwork that I will suggest in my brief account concerns the intertwined relationship between duality and liminality. In what follows, I will demonstrate how these two elements can be seen as entangled key-concepts, apt to provide a possible critical reading of the exhibition. In particular, I wish to maintain that liminality was a strongly featured trait of the video-installation presented at the Montréalaise venue, as it represented the main characterizing rationale on a number of levels.

Both *La Vie Abstraite 1: Le Temps Transformé* (2015) and *La Vie Abstraite 2: Espace Du Silence* (2016) put an emphasized sense of in-betweenness into play. First, this is a liminality involving the visitor as s/he enters the exhibition space: approaching LVA 1, which is made up of four different videos, s/he's caught by the monumental projections covering the parallel walls of the first room. Here, the elegant linearity of the arrangement produces a visual impact that was echoed by the high-resolution clarity of the image projected on the lateral walls: one feels the natural necessity to stop and contemplate, realizing only thereafter that s/he has to proceed towards the rest of the gallery in order to discover the remaining videos constituting the installation. These cover the whole surface of the left-side wall positioned in the second room, which is separated from

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the first by a perpendicular wall that leaves a portion of open, shapeless space placed between the two square rooms. From there the visitor can alternate the direction of her/his gaze well and seamlessly look at the four videos.

Far from being something immediate and easy to realize, such position represents a quite strategic vantage point to grasp what happens on screen. I am not claiming that it is the ‘most proper one’ in terms of consumption of the artwork (despite the fact that a 180 degree turn would have allowed a nearly full view of LVA 2, too), for it requires a continuous accommodation of the watching conditions and a constant movement of the eyes, if not a full bodily motion, to actually see the image. However, just because of this, such *position* is interesting to observe in terms of *dis-position*, that is, the position of the viewing subject in relation to the cinematic *dispositif*. To put it bluntly, to see LVA 1 the visitor has to turn and shift from one screen to the other, from the first to the second room and possibly back, in a sort of choreography that s/he performs quite unconsciously. This very movement makes her/him inhabit the exhibition space and, more specifically, the *limen* area via a sensuous and corporeal feeling, as well as by experiencing the warmth created by her/his own motion throughout the physical environment of the gallery.



Image 1: *LVA 1 – L’espace du silence* at Galerie René Blouin. View of the second room towards the first: the threshold space is on the left | © Pascal Grandmaison

As anthropological and dramaturgical readings of the notion notably proposed, such an idea of threshold is conceptually connected to transition and, therefore, to a state of passage – be it temporal or spatial – which synthesizes a field of pure potentiality. Within this interpretive framework, liminality is the dimension of

the ‘betwixt and between,’<sup>2</sup> and as such it is the *milieu* of openness. Implying a quite evolutionist stance, it is the place of progression, where possibility can grow into becoming to the extent that only thanks to such blooming of sorts, potentiality can be ritually disclosed in a future completion. Except that becoming can entail *détours*.

Without meaning to discard the scheme just briefly mentioned, I would posit that LVA 1 & 2, at least as installed at Galerie René Blouin, provide some evidence for coupling the established VanGennep-Turner model mentioned above to one in which rituality is not simplified in its symbolic value, yet is specifically considered in its (re-/)territorializing power. Focusing on the movement bridging the beginning and final states that represent the opposite poles of the classic ritual trajectory, enables one to reconstitute its meaningfulness to the dynamics per se, as an ongoing process. Such a move opens up the opportunity to extend and repeat what was a unique motion, turning it into the form of multiple movements going back and forth. In this perspective, the threshold is not necessarily meant to lead to a different, new, and ultimate status – maybe it is a vantage point from which one can grasp some bits of both states facing onto it; it might then be a place of ‘non-transitory transition’ and, conversely, it may represent the locus of constant motion where a fluid attitude is expressed, where the subject can go ahead and then return, maybe even to the end of getting back again to where he was heading before. This is, in other words, an attitude, a *disposition* towards motion which finds in movement itself its *raison d’être*. It is a *position* which *disposes* the subject both ideally and spatially within a regime of liquidity that resembles his open chance to become both solid and gaseous and, perhaps most of all, which winks at cinema as a *dispositif* originally based on a series of still images put in motion, inherently comprising both stillness and motion.

Such in-betweenness does not pertain solely to the off-screen space. On the contrary, it can be well observed in the on-screen dimension too, thereby confirming that ‘deictic turn’<sup>3</sup> according to which, gallery films would typically provide the visitor with the opportunity to acknowledge the density of space, especially in relation to the gallery – a dimension which has yet to be fruitfully considered in its complexity.

As for the representation, then, LVA 1 & 2 contribute to creating a deep sense of liminality in that both parts of the video-installation basically deal with change. They do not describe an irreversible modification, but rather a cyclic, continuous flow

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<sup>2</sup> Van Gennep, Arnold, 2004. *The rites of passage*. London: Routledge; Turner, Victor, 1982. *From ritual to theatre. The human seriousness of play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal.

<sup>3</sup> Butler, Alison 2010. “A deictic turn: space and location in contemporary gallery film and video installation,” *Screen* 51 (Winter): 305-323.

expressed mainly by means of an artistic research focused on natural elements.



Images 2-3: *LVA 1 – L'espace du silence* | © Pascal Grandmaison

In the wake of an almost alchemic inspiration, Blais and Grandmaison offer a close take of water, fire, earth, and air unfolding throughout the four projections and constantly referring one to the other in a complementary, sometimes repeating, mirroring fashion: fire burning a painted canvas,<sup>4</sup> water in the form of rain and solidified as ice, air as wind waving the in the trees and making the water drops gently oblique while falling, earth as the main natural context embracing and somehow providing a physical support to all the

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<sup>4</sup> The canvas is a clear reference to Suprematism and to Malevich. Further information, which I do not have room enough to develop here, is provided by Grandmaison on his website: <http://www.pascalgrandmaison.com/>

events involving the mentioned elements, and, on the top of it, flesh. The halo-like presence of a subject enters the diegesis in the form of a body part: a hand, or an object in motion whose source must implicitly be someone moving it. Hence, I disjoin here such presence from that of a character who in fact is never fully shown, and I prefer focusing on a solely physical, perhaps affective, figure. Flesh then, is depicted and can well be seen as something reuniting the four elements: a corporeal presence which both needs and essentially sits on nature in its material aspects. It is largely made of water, it presumably composes an organic body which needs air to transpire, breath and ultimately live, as well as needs warmth (that clearly alludes to fire), which it also produces. Finally, flesh is also situated within the environment where it is placed and thus is physically connected to earth, which enables the body it belongs to effectively and quite literally be-in-the-world.



Image 4: *LVA 1 – L'espace du silence.* © Pascal Grandmaison

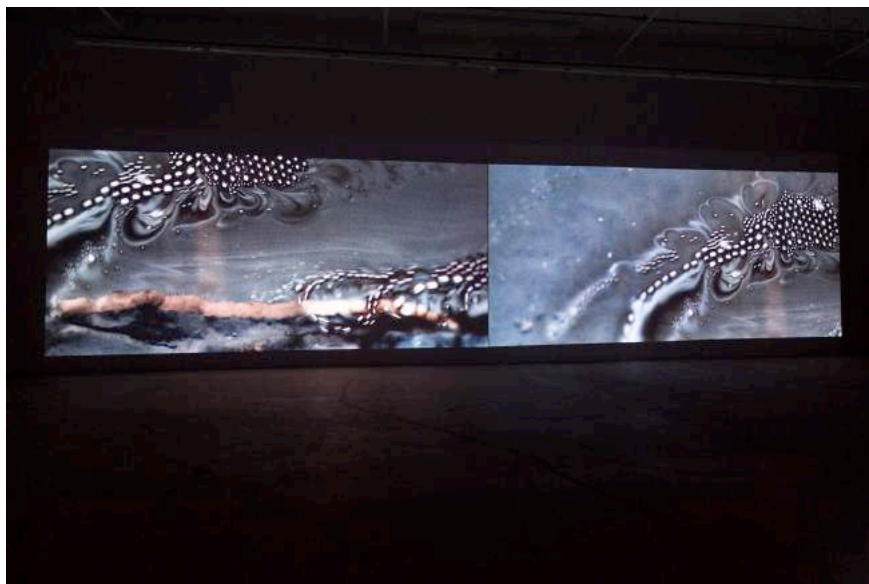


Image 5: *LVA 2 – Le temps transformé.* © Pascal Grandmaison

Such a vitalist, organic representation is strengthened by the sequences of various natural processes, all of which do convey a sense of transition and ongoingness. For example, from LVA 1, where sun is quickly replaced by clouds floating in the sky, and then by rain and then again snow, to the close-up of air bubbles dancing on the water surface as if they were transparent pearls scattered on a table and yet guided by a mysterious magnetic force that arranges and merges them; from the description of the canvas I already mentioned, which is caught while burning, to another burning scene presented in LVA 2, where the image of what looks like a sheet of paper also bursting into flames is projected backwards, in a sort of utopia where the inverted temporality allows a reconstruction of the white surface; from the grainy white crystals recorded in LVA 2 aggregating, falling, creating tiny pristine craters, shaping and reshaping as fractals, to the meadow circumfused in light, where grass and sky seem to lose consistency and their out of focus image offers overlaying spots of color choreographically moving onscreen. Conceptually connected to processuality – be it leading to becoming or dissolution – LVA 1 & 2 are played upon images of a narrative of never-ending transition: water, clouds, fire, crystals, and wind are symbols of the changing state of matter, of a consistency which does not seem to be stable, settled and definitive. Abstraction becomes then the standard condition for a constantly transitory visual thinking. However, that created by Blais and Granmaison is an abstraction based on very physical elements – elements which are quintessential to reality and therefore simultaneously evoke a sense of materiality, tactility, and corporality that find completion off screen in the situatedness of the visitor. Her/his being-in-the-world speaks to the phenomenological atmosphere featuring the images, somehow resembling the duality characterizing the impalpability and simultaneous tangibility of the image, and the concrete, albeit liminal, disposition one has to adopt in order to visit the exhibition.

If liminality as I have tried to sketch it in response to LVA does not put into play a dichotomizing mechanism, then the resolution to such profound, multifaceted, reiterated binary resides in duality. That is, the two states or objects characterizing the opposite poles distinguished by the threshold are not necessarily opposite. As I have tried to elaborate, LVA offers the occasion to reflect on this dynamics in pragmatic, representational, and I shall add – ontological terms.

Rooted in the threshold at the junction of the two (three) rooms of the gallery, the visitor is not only betwixt and between, but somehow also in all of them at the same time. His/Her position is at the crossroads of multiple directions – a vantage point which is part of and encapsulates the spirit of the overall disposition. Content-wise, the artists make quite clear that concreteness needs abstraction as

much as abstraction lives in the material consistency of the four basic elements and thus sits on concreteness. Further, the flow of life incessantly taking shape is grasped thanks to a reduced (if not almost absent) camera movement, at the crossroads between motion and stillness, kinesis – and therefore cinema – and its opposite. Finally, LVA can be labeled as a ‘gallery film,’<sup>5</sup> that is, a cinematic form apt to be exhibited in art spaces and therefore not only able to adhere to both artistic and cinematic codes, but to convey the sense of encounter between cinema and art in theoretical terms, too.

It is, to conclude, in the place of conjunction – albeit seemingly oxymoronic – that richness is expressed and the full potentiality of life finds completion, be it a space to inhabit, a beautiful image to get lost in, or a way of thinking cinema.

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<sup>5</sup> Fowler, Catherine. 2004. “Room for experiment: Gallery films and vertical time in from Maya Deren to Eija Liisa Ahtila,” *Screen* 45 (Winter) :324-244.