

Valérie Blass and the Reanimated (Whimsical) Uncanny

Amelia Jones

In his 1919 essay “The ‘Uncanny,’” written amid the devastation wrought across Europe by the trench warfare of WWI, Sigmund Freud articulated a theory of the disoriented, dissociated subject. In his 1927 essay “Fetishism,” he proposed a theory that functions almost as a reversal of the anxious open-endedness associated with the uncanny; in “Fetishism,” Freud theorized the fixing of a precarious moment of open-ended fear and anxiety (when the male subject supposedly imagines his own potential castration after seeing the “absence” of genitalia in relation to his mother’s body) in a state of objectification that closes off the disorientation of the uncanny, preventing all sorts of queer and feminizing potential relations from occurring.¹

From the uncertainty of the uncanny to the conventional fixities of the fetish, Freud’s theories trace trajectories of desire that Valérie Blass’s works also navigate, but in overtly perverse and playful ways. While Freud moved toward the security of the heteronormative fetish in his later work, Blass’s practice—as she notes in the quotation opposite²—functions by stretching out the moment of trying to recognize the thing before us, tantalizingly refusing to provide the closure of final

recognition. Far from delivering the certitude promised by Freud’s idea of the fetish, Blass plays with our expectations regarding objects and suspends them in a relation of unease and potentially “uncanny” provocation.

The uncanny—“all that is terrible ... all that arouses dread and creeping horror ... what is fearful ... [that which evokes] feelings of unpleasantness and repulsion”—is, for Freud, explicitly a question of aesthetics. It is a question of aesthetics because it arises from our encounter with some human-made entity, involving a haunting or a return: “The ‘uncanny’ is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once familiar.”³ Freud makes a great deal of etymology in his essay. In its German form the uncanny is the *unheimlich* (unhomely), linking it within the minds of his male patients—not incidentally—with the “former *Heim* [home] of all human beings,” the “female genital organs.”⁴ The dread, horror and repulsion of the uncanny, Freud writes, is an anxious return to the fearful horrors of the male patient’s original “home,” the (Freud argues) terrifying folds and wet spaces of his mother’s body. In “Fetishism,” notoriously, Freud sutures this anxiety into heteronormative

L’Homme souci, 2009
Styrofoam, synthetic hair,
Miu Miu shoes
167 × 51 × 51 cm



Damien en gris et rose, 2005
Cement, latex, pigments
47 x 38 x 22 cm

structures of desire by positing that the male subject, motivated by the “terrifying shock of threatened castration at the sight of the female genitals,” which are “felt to be inferior,” takes up an object of desire (a fetish) that palliates the threat of castration by deferring the lack.⁵

Why would I introduce an essay about the whimsical, and conceptually and materially evocative, works of Valérie Blass with the strangely anxious haunting and the misogynistic objectification of the female body which Freud evokes in his essays on the uncanny and fetishism? A stroke of perversity in its own right, perhaps, this reference to the uncanny and fetishism is strategically aimed at evoking the simmering tension, the brew of titillation, humour (what Helena Reckitt has termed “punkish insouciance”) and (in Freud’s words) “morbid anxiety” that make Blass’s work powerful rather than simply cute, as a singular reference to the whimsical would imply.⁶ I am wresting the uncanny and fetishism from Freud via the work of Blass in the hopes of illuminating both the dark spaces of a kind of male anxiety endemic to patriarchy in the twentieth century (typified in Freud’s useful but worrisome mappings of gender identification) and the exquisite tension Blass’s work puts into play. I am

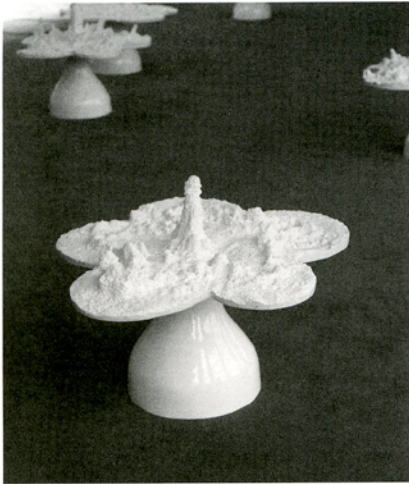
in turn using Freud’s concept to wrest the work of Blass away from the tendency in the critical writing about it to focus on its humour while disavowing the darker uncanny effects of its often minatory, if also comical, forms.

Ultimately, Blass undermines the misogyny of Freud’s uncanny in the most sassy and cuttily, darkly funny ways, often through shifts of scale and disorienting juxtapositions. Her work extends and expands to feminist effect the surrealist interest in juxtaposing unlike elements (Lautréamont’s “chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table,” of which the surrealists made great use) to provoke new, often psychically unsettling, meanings.⁷ Another key strategy for Blass is doubling, often through moulding or mirroring.

Doubling is one of Freud’s key examples of experiences that evoke the uncanny. Springing from the archaic narcissism that motivates all human thought and action, conscious and unconscious, doubling is a means of projecting one’s self outward so that, Freud writes, “the one possesses knowledge, feeling and experience in common with the other, identifies himself with the other person, so that his self

becomes confounded, or the foreign self is substituted for his own.”⁸ For Freud, of course, it is implicitly or explicitly the male who is the subject, narcissistic or not. The doubling of the self is thus a negative projection of the ego “outward” as a defence.⁹

For Valérie Blass, doubling is an effect both sinister and amusing; it is unsettling and also wields a feminist edge in its potential to open out or subvert codes of gender and sexuality. In her doublings, the uncanny is hijacked in a way that makes us aware of our in-betweenness, of the fact that we (men, women and otherwise) are always projecting outward, but never where or who we think we are. *Damien en gris et rose*, 2005, for example, explicitly plays on doubling, presenting two almost identical reliefs of the emoting head of an androgynous figure—the heads are the same, but they seem eerily out of sync optically; they are actually negative moulds made from a photograph of Blass’s son, but hover between appearing convex and concave. As Blass has noted: “Some might consider *Damien en gris et rose* a figurative work. But for me, it’s about modelling the same picture twice, the experience of that. What’s on the left is not important, what’s on the right is not important—it’s



HELEN CHADWICK
Piss Flowers, 1992
 Bronze, cellulose lacquer
 Approximately 7 × 6.5 × 6.5 cm each
 Courtesy The Helen Chadwick Estate and David Notarius



MARCEL DUCHAMP
Female Fig Leaf, 1950
 Bronze, 9 × 13.7 × 12.5 cm
 Collection of the Tate Gallery, London
 Purchased with assistance from the National
 Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund, 1997
 © Succession Marcel Duchamp/SODRAC (2011)

what's in-between."¹⁰ Optically, our visual complex and thus our psychic structures of identification struggle to differentiate the two "sides," which are hung a few feet apart, but in the end we find ourselves in between, in a state of uncanny suspension. This sensation is also "doubled" by the effect of the undecidability of the gender of the figure we contemplate (suggestive of the late Victorian period, the androgyny of the face allows it to be interpreted as either a fleshy woman or an effeminate man).

This doubled head also relates to Blass's interest in working with moulds, a strategy central to her manipulation and refashioning of found materials. She has mentioned her interest in Marcel Duchamp's "mould of a vagina," as well as the idea of a woman pissing in the snow and the possibility of "mould[ing] the form the piss makes" as it freezes.¹¹ The mould makes a literal and indexical, but obverse, double of a concrete (or fluid/frozen) thing in space: it doubles but reverses into an "imprint," which in the words of art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, marks "the passage from matter to matter [which] reverses all," revealing the "reversibility of all things."¹²

Duchamp's *Female Fig Leaf*, 1950, which is presumably the "mould of a vagina" to

which Blass refers, is a hard but tender object, a block of obdurate bronze (the object, recast in the early 1960s, was made from a series of plaster casts moulded from the "slit" between the legs of the female mannequin in his life-sized tableau *Étant donnés*, which he worked on from 1946 to 1966); the hard but undulating bronze block models a quivering sliver of flesh. The irony of Duchamp's object is that its reversal actually gives form to an "absence": as I have written elsewhere, the female figure in *Étant donnés* is notable for its complete lack of labia and clitoris—there is simply a gash between the legs. The figure thus literalizes Freud's insistence that the female body has "nothing" for the boy to see except a lack of a penis.¹³ By reversing this lack through the moulding process, Duchamp slyly returns the organ of female pleasure to the picture, as it were, but in an estranged (doubled) way.¹⁴

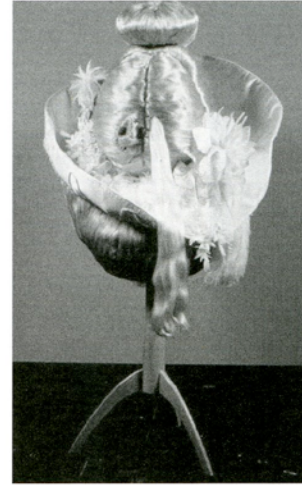
Significantly, in light of Blass's comments on moulding and pissing in the snow, in the early 1990s the British feminist artist Helen Chadwick urinated in the snow and moulded the resulting "hollows" into mushroom-like mounds, which she called "Piss Flowers." These Alice-in-Wonderland forms are white and crystalline—they appear to be shaped out of plaster—but,

paralleling Duchamp's and Blass's subtle trickery with materials, they are moulded in bronze and covered with white cellulose lacquer. Pissing on the ground is, of course, a male prerogative, as the hose-like urinary organ of men's bodies (for Freud the inherently superior penis) is indubitably more suited to propelling piss outward.¹⁵ Chadwick's *Piss Flowers*, 1991-1992, thus not only give positive form to the void produced by the spraying of hot liquid into cold snow, they also produce feminine "flowers" from abject materials and make a claim for the agency of this artist's particular (pissing/art-making) female body.

This level of abjection is followed through in Blass's *Éléphant en vert et noir* (p. 43), which doubles two vaguely phallic or shit-like mounds, reminding us that the fearful (uncanny) female genitals have nothing on the terrifying protrusions of the male anatomy, which (yes) sometimes symbolically turn to shit. For if the impulse of patriarchy, so eloquently outlined by Freud in his theory of fetishism, is to transform the world into a series of projections that allow masculine subjects to disavow their potential castration, then doubling exposes these projections as chimeras. As Didi-Huberman's insights and Duchamp's *Female Fig Leaf* make clear, any



LINDA BENGLIS
For Carl André, 1970
 Acrylic foam
 143 × 136 × 117 CM
 Collection of the Modern Art
 Museum of Fort Worth Museum
 Purchase, The Benjamin J. Hillier
 Memorial Trust
 © Lynda Benglis/SODRAC (2011)



MILLIE WILSON
White Girl, 1995
 Synthetic hair, steel,
 wood, mixed media
 213 × 91 × 91 cm
 Courtesy the artist

doubling or imprint is also a reversal. Phallic anxiety, attempting to project abjection outward, returns to itself—perhaps even in the frozen form of an abstracted elephant or a giant turd.

So much the feminist artist Lynda Benglis sketched with precision in her wonderful acrylic foam pour-piece produced in 1970 in “homage” to the minimalist sculptor Carl André, *For Carl André, 1970*. If male artists from Jackson Pollock to André were heroized for spewing (pissing? ejaculating?) creative forms onto horizontal surfaces, then Benglis (like Chadwick twenty years later) could do them one better by metaphorically pissing into the snow further than they. Blass’s elephants resonate with Benglis’s huge pile of shit—both are abject reminders of how models of heroizing one kind of action as high art, one kind of subject as artist or genius, always “abject” or expel other models (and other subjects). This knowledge, brought to the surface by feminists first in the 1960s and 1970s, is the “elephant” in the room (so to speak) of modernist and postmodernist value systems in art discourse.

In addition to explicit doubling, Blass could be said to make implicit doubles with her reiterative turn to life-size (or larger than life-size) human forms in her

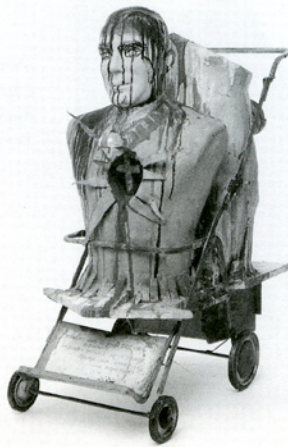
works. With the hirsute *L’Homme souci* (p. 58-59), for example, Blass produces an oddly non-masculine yet phallic “homme” with voluminous hair and spike-heeled shoes—both relating to typical fetishes in Freud’s model. Freud claims that “the foot or shoe owes its attraction as a fetish ... to the circumstance that the inquisitive boy used to peer up the woman’s legs towards her genitals,” only of course to “see” the “horror” of her lack of genitals and thus to be launched into an acute fear of his own potential castration. And, he continues, “velvet and fur reproduce ... the sight of the pubic hair which ought to have revealed the longed-for penis.”¹⁶

Blass’s impressive, equivocally sexed “male” body—which echoes several life-size figures in straw made around the same time (for example, *L’Homme paille* [p. 62-63])—looms above us, and above Blass in a photograph of her standing next to “him” taken in her studio at the Darling Foundry in fall 2009. He is certainly phallic, but the turgid form of his body is softened by his mane of unruly hair; he becomes a latter-day Lady Godiva, poking immense fun at the pretensions of masculine prowess (no wonder the “man” is “worried”). *L’Homme souci* is most definitely a queer doubling of some kind of masculine ideal, a fetishizing

parody of fetishism in its doubling and tripling of the codes of Freudian fetishism (the phallic body, the hair, the shoes).

This paradoxically fetishistic and queer dimension of *L’Homme souci* recalls a key feminist work from the 1990s: Los Angeles-based artist Millie Wilson’s 1995 *White Girl*, a massive seven-foot-high silver wig on a stand, adorned with a white ruff and a display of fake flowers.¹⁷ *White Girl*, like *L’Homme souci*, turns hair itself into a form of queer, feminine (“girl”) and here racially charged (“white”) embodiment, again parodying Freud’s concept of the fetish (“velvet and fur”) standing in for the supposedly “absent” genitals of the female. Rather than coyly diverting attention from whatever lacks might be projected onto the female body, both *L’Homme souci* and *White Girl* assert massive, larger-than-life, sassy, sexually ambiguous forms of corporeality, refusing the binarism that underlies Freud’s patriarchal models of sexual difference.

Such Blass figures as *L’Homme souci* also compare closely with historical assemblage works from the late 1950s and early 1960s, some of which introduced an explicit commentary on gendered identity and thus resonate with the feminist potential of Blass’s androgynous bodies. A work by Los Angeles-based artist Ed Kienholz, *John*



EDWARD KIENZHOLZ
John Doe, 1959
 Free-standing
 assemblage: oil paint on
 mannequin parts, child's
 perambulator, toy, wood,
 metal, plaster and rubber
 100.2 x 48.3 x 79.4 cm
 The Menil Collection, Houston

Doe, 1959, places the top half of a male mannequin on a child's perambulator, covering his armless torso and face with drips of bloodlike paint and piercing his chest with a hole surrounded by shards, as if it had been blown open by a bullet. Constructed of wood with additional found and cast plaster objects, *From France*, by Venezuelan-French artist Marisol (Escobar), stands the height of a large child; it is composed of two masked men in a box, their feminine ankles and feet (one of which is missing) dangling beneath them. These, too, are castrated men, phallic in stature, but disempowered through the withering of the very part of their bodies (feet) necessary to fight or flee. The withered feet mock the idea of a foot fetish, as they seem flaccid and useless—the opposite of the taut little body part Freud wants to argue can substitute for the “lacking” penis of the mother.

Blass is onto something with her continual process of putting together, juxtaposing, playing, replaying, doubling. I would argue that she moves beyond 1960s modes of assemblage, such as Kienholz's junk aesthetic, applying contemporary strategies of appropriation to refashion the very concept of assemblage—the affinity with Wilson's classic 1990s feminist

work makes this shift clear. Rather than raw juxtapositions of clearly found and aggressively manipulated objects, Blass remakes and rethinks her found forms: her assemblages are far more finished, more elegant, less cacophonous than those of Kienholz, Marisol or other key assemblage artists from the earlier period. This enables her to produce works that function more in a single stroke and thus encourage our psychic bonding or repulsion by putting in motion a nuanced play with deliberately crossed and confused tropes of gender and sexuality (at this point often implicit, worked into the forms, scale and detailed accoutrements of the figure).

Complementary to Blass's figures (which seem themselves haunted by Freud's notion of the uncanny and theory of fetishism) are her haunting objects—works that veer away from the direct dialogue with fetishism and sexual identification to explore and promote a mode of “haptic” visuality through what has been called an “intuitive bricolage.”¹⁸ This mode of visuality is evoked not only through the bringing together of materials in a “bricolage” of visual effects, but through an extremely canny working of a range of materials that results in forms that belie expectations. The canny working leads to uncanny effects.

We find ourselves again, this time in more abstract ways, suspended between a belief in appearance and a suspicion that something else is going on.

Works such as *Cette jeune femme ne sait pas s'habiller* (p. 80), and *S'il te plaît* (p. 142-143) exemplify Blass's highly crafted approach to integrating found objects into complex, provocative and aesthetically powerful objects using other materials to reframe and recast recognizable things, shapes and references. *Cette jeune femme* appears to be solid “rock” and yet is shaped like hacked-out sections of drapery from baroque sculpture, glued together into a gem-like object with high-art pretensions. Our presumption of its solidity, however, is dubious; walking around it, through the haptic effects of its revealed edges and the contradictions put in play by its odd colouring and seeming lack of weight, we are launched into a sense of uncanny mismatch between what is initially proposed as heavy and rock-like and surfaces that imply lightness or even an inner void. As with many of Blass's works, there is a play between apparent solidity and weight and the emptiness of actual voids or lightness of cheap craft-shop materials (in a new series, for example, she carves Pietàs and other symbolically



S'il te plaît, 2009
Ceramic objects, glue,
flocking
71 × 43 × 30 cm

overwrought figures from blocks made of glued-together layers of Styrofoam). *Cette jeune femme* is, in fact, made from fabric, urethane, leatherette and plaster. The joke, uneasy as this innocuous object has made us feel, is on us.

S'il te plaît also produces an effect of the uncanny. We remember that the void is, as per Freud, the ultimate uncanny space or image (reminding the male subject of the dreaded womb and female genitalia). Blass's use of invaginating folds and holes to create a visual play around and in relation to the interior of the piece complicates Freud's simplistic formulation, obviously sketched from a masculinist point of view. Punctuating this otherwise closed form with tantalizing openings here and there (with lips that stand out from the black surface, coloured suggestively like rosy flesh), Blass plays with the continual flow between inside and outside. *S'il te plaît* is both a coherent thing and a cacophonous play of visual surfaces that become haptically enticing. The surfaces of this array of things massed together are blended and smoothed with a shadowy layering of flocking, which both mutes the play of light on the piece and further encourages our desire to touch, exacerbated by the fragility and enticing quality of the suggestively placed holes.

Blass has described a complex play of appearance, visibility, seeing and not seeing that her works all set in motion in one way or another; her words roll forth beautifully in their original French locution: "Il y a ce que l'on voit et ce que l'on ne voit pas. Il y a ce que l'on ne voit pas et ce que l'on doit voir. Il y a ce que l'on veut voir et ce que l'on ne peut voir."¹⁹ The power of her practice is the continual play—and continual tension—it sets up among these modes of seeing, wanting to see, being forced to see, and not being able to see. As with the quotation that opens this essay, Blass points through her words to the capacity of her work to bring vision, and identification (of what one is seeing, and ultimately of *who one is*), into question. Her remarks about vision amplify this effect, referencing the crux of what it means to make three-dimensional objects out of detritus and produce new objects that refer to the human body at all points. Assemblage works, perhaps particularly those (like Blass's) that refashion and reshape, sometimes covering over the signs of construction, put in play the paradox of our relationship not only to "art" but to our own bodies in the world. It is a paradox summed up by Freud's notion of the uncanny, where the line between the animate and inanimate (or dead) body is unclear.²⁰

Three-dimensional artworks made (like Blass's) from things in the world can open up the paradox of a vision that is haptic and yet always thwarted, a vision that sets in motion a yearning to touch and to "know" both from the inside (those orifices in *S'il te plaît* are enticing) and from what can be apprehended only as a surface effect. Blass's works manifest themselves as impossible to know fully through vision; they generate an uncanny sensation that makes us feel always a little disoriented and uneasy. Keeping this tension of the whimsical yet menacing uncanny always in play, Blass's artistic intelligence is to reanimate what threatens to be forever inanimate, "dead." The work of art is a corpse but, momentarily, Blass brings it to life.

1 The fetish, Freud writes, “remains a token of triumph over the threat of castration and a safeguard against it; it also saves the fetishist from being a homosexual by endowing women with the attribute which makes them acceptable as sexual objects.” Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism” (1927), trans. Joan Riviere, in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 216.

2 From an interview with Leah Sandals, “Valérie Blass: Particle Collider,” *Canadian Art* 26, 3 (Fall 2009), p. 112-115. Available online at: <http://www.canadianart.ca/art/features/2009/09/01/valerie-blass/>; accessed September 22, 2011.

3 Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1955), p. 219-252; see especially p. 219-220. I have modified the translation slightly according to another widely published translation of “The ‘Uncanny’”; see, for example, David Sandner, ed., *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2004), p. 74-95.

4 Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” *The Standard Edition*, p. 245.

5 Freud, “Fetishism,” p. 216.

6 Helena Reckitt, “Down and Dirty with Valérie Blass,” in *Valérie Blass*, exhib. cat. (Montréal: Parisian Laundry, 2011), p. 27. Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” p. 13.

7 In the original French: “Beau comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d’une machine à coudre et d’un parapluie!” Le Comte de Lautréamont (Isidore Ducasse), *Les Chants de Maldoror* (Paris/Brussels: n.p., 1874), p. 289-290; cited in William Seitz’s classic catalogue *The Art of Assemblage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), p. 40.

8 Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” p. 234; translation modified per Sandner, ed., *Fantastic Literature*, p. 85. Freud draws extensively on the work of Otto Rank in discussing this aspect of the uncanny.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 236.

10 Leah Sandals, “Valérie Blass,” p. 112.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 114. Blass’s entire quotation is worth citing: “In sculpture you can produce forms that you can’t necessarily visualize. Think about Marcel Duchamp’s moulds of a vagina—you’d never think of the shape of that mould, but that object is still real. You can see reality very differently through moulds. If a woman pissed on the snow and you moulded the form the piss makes in the snow, you’d see such a fantastic object! It’s a reality you can’t usually see.”

12 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 194 (my translation). This text is cited and analyzed in direct relation to Blass’s work in the very interesting article by Jean-Ernest Joos, “Le Poids de l’infigurable. À propos du travail de Valérie Blass,” *Esse arts + opinions: Dérives II* 55 (Fall 2005), p. 54-55.

13 See my book *Postmodernism and the Engendering of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 191-204.

14 Notably, as I discuss in *ibid.* (p. 90-93), Duchamp mystified his public with this and three other “sex part” pieces from the 1950s; these pieces became known long before the revelation of *Étant donnés* itself, which was only installed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1969, after Duchamp’s death the previous year. The sex part pieces are themselves thus uncanny repetitions of something that was only known some time after they were produced and released to public view.

15 As Freud notes: “The normal prototype of all fetishes is the penis of the man, just as the normal prototype of an organ felt to be inferior is the real little penis of the woman, the clitoris.” Freud, “Fetishism,” p. 219.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 217.

17 Wilson’s *White Girl* is typical of the turn in the 1990s among particularly feminist artists in the U.S. and the U.K. toward the use of found or made objects to produce sleek fetishistic objects, often massive in scale. Wilson, like Lauren Lesko and others, often hired manufacturers to produce these gorgeously fabricated objects, some of which stand in for bodies or furniture.

18 For more on Blass and “haptic” vision, see Jake Moore, “Look at What I Am Thinking. See What I Am Feeling,” in *Valérie Blass* (see note 6), p. 53; and on bricolage, see Marie-Ève Charron, “Questions d’apparence,” *Le Devoir* (January 22, 2011), p. E6.

19 In Josée Bélisle et al., *Rien ne se perd, rien ne se crée, tout se transforme : La Triennale québécoise 2008* (Montréal: Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 2008), p. 66. Given in the English version of this catalogue as: “There’s what you see and what you don’t see. There’s what you don’t see and what you should see. There’s what you want to see and what you can’t see” (*Nothing Is Lost, Nothing Is Created, Everything Is Transformed: The Québec Triennial 2008*, p. 66).

20 Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” p. 226-230.