

***Le Grand Balcon*, BNLMTL 2016**
 Presented by La Biennale de
 Montréal, with the Musée d'art
 contemporain de Montréal and
 local partners, Montreal
 Oct. 19, 2016 – Jan. 15, 2017
 by Xenia Benivolski

¹ Sebastian Brant's *The Ship of Fools* in German verse was published first in 1494 in Basel, Switzerland. Consisting of 112 printed blocks, the trope was commonly used in the pre-Reformation period to legitimize criticism. The fiction had involved a court jester, and so by writing in the voice of the fool, Brant was able to criticize the church without precautions.

From the balcony of Europe in North America – Montreal – the fabric of European Socialism looks to be fraying at the edges, as the city sees the notion of the Marxist revolution, with Germany at the helm,¹ turning its ship and heading squarely back into the realm of nostalgia, survived by a strong urge to do nothing. In Anne Imhof's *Angst III*, a group of bored-looking teens nonchalantly scours the surfaces of a large white room filled with artificial vapour. Edging towards the runway, they encounter stuffed hawks, cigarettes, pop cans and other accessories while performing the slow-motion feat of mounting one of them onto a pedestal, only for that person to collapse into the arms of their peers and be carried to safety soon after. Several sit above the scene, chewing gum or simply observing. The audience waits patiently, despite the slowness and the fog, for the young people to engage in some radical action but the performance is purely aesthetic. A young man looks into my eyes as he slowly pours a can of Pepsi on the ground before resuming a thoughtful position on the ground. By the end of the public reception, the entire museum is shrouded in thin vapour.

A critique of a critique, the exhibition of the 2016 Montreal Biennale – *Le Grand Balcon* – recounts the hedonistic joys missing from the Marxist texts we like to use as guidance. In his single-channel instal-

lation, *The Swap* (2016), Michael Blum reminds us that *Das Kapital* refrains from mentioning joy, sex, teens, music or alcohol and bears but one spirited mention of dance. Like *Angst III*, *The Swap* is the third chapter in a trilogy, which includes *Wandering Marxwards* (1998) and *The Three Failures* (2006). In it, Blum's recurring character wanders purposefully through the streets of Shanghai until he arrives at a party. Up until then, a heavily accented woman narrates *The Swap*, calmly describing the now overly familiar repetitive global injury set in motion by Capitalism. Now, recordings of Karl Marx and Lenin ominously pierce the techno soundtrack. It hurts a little but in a good way.

The Nun's Island gas station in Montreal is a modernist filling station designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1969, which has been out of service since 2012. A stern counteraction to Buckminster Fuller's Utopian dome of 1967, the station was commissioned by Imperial Oil, and the structure is now a designated community space and a focal offsite location of the Montreal Biennale, which places a well-timed investigation of cross-continental European Imperialism in the hands of a slippery cast of absences: Günther Anders, Claude Eatherly, Marquis de Sade, Bob Hope, Wendy, Molière, Chantal Akerman, Adolf Loos, The Five Wives of Lajos Bíró, a Lady and two Invisible Men. The presence of these ghosts haunts the exhibition, taking immediate form in collective IMPURE FICTION's intentionally and playfully mistranslated Anglo-Flemish adaptation of Molière's *Le Misanthrope*; the performance injects fresh queerness into a comedy of manners that manages to fully embody the ludicrousness of European society, its connection to Montreal and the tired moralism of the art world at large, citing that "... Mankind has grown so base, / I mean to break with the whole human race."

A few blocks away, Marina Rosenfeld's performance *Free Exercise* (2014–2016) takes place at the Cathcart Armoury, performed by the Fusiliers Mont-Royal (an enlisted band based at the Armoury of the Fusiliers



Anne Imhof, *Angst III*, performance, October 18-19, 2016, 7-11 p.m., Musée d'art contemporain Montréal. PHOTO: JONAS LEIHENER, IMAGE COURTESY OF LA BIENNALE DE MONTRÉAL

Mont-Royal) as well as some local musicians. The 70-minute piece engages in a series of collective musical exercises – which might better be described as drills – underscoring ritualism and cooperation in military subculture. The work is one of several performances referencing traditional European performance platforms: over the course of the week, I also see a play, an opera and a symphony. Not all of the performances work to challenge the European canon as well as Rosenfeld's, but the combined experiences leave the viewer seeking another perspective.

That window becomes available unexpectedly when entering the exhibition at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, through Valérie Blass' playfully hollow *8 sculptures*, which make the appealing gesture of revealing by concealing. Blass' reference to H.G. Wells' *Invisible Man* (1987) novella stands as a reminder of the equally absurdist *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison (1952), a novel detailing the conflict between Black American identity and Marxism, and whose nameless narrator was modelled after Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864).² Directly across the room, Luke Willis Thompson had reproduced the conditions of Warhol's original "screen tests," in which less than a handful of participants were people of colour. By casting the victims of police brutality in *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries* (2016), Thomson does the double duty of questioning representations of racialized people in film and media while reproducing the formula that was essentially designed to exclude them.

The exhibition title, *Le Grand Balcon*, rolls out of a baggy reference to a 1956 play where the inhabitants of an upper-class brothel articulate a microcosm of an impending revolution outside while awaiting intervention by the authorities. Jean Genet³ uses the situation to explore power shifts between a bishop who forgives a criminal, a judge who punishes a thief and a general who rides his horse. Genet's concerns with meta-theatricality beg for a reflexive position to justify the model of the European Biennale and a serious consideration of the pleasure and ritual in participating in the hedonism of the art system, however these desires are only met within the confines of the system that created them. Grounding the work at the MACM, a partial namesake, Luzie Meyer's *Le Balcon* (2016), sees three men (Reece York, Dan Kwon, Salomo Andrén) verbally live out their fantasies of domination with a prostitute who also happens to be the narrator. While inside the work these interactions and desires are neutralized through the use of overdubbing and playful montage, the viewer is implicated in another form of sado-masochistic subjectivity: that of the institutional critique.

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² Famously refuting the utopian vision of *What Is To Be Done?* Dostoevsky ridicules enlightened self-interest in notes, and later a case for equating fear, suffering and criminality with freedom via Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, first published in 12 monthly instalments in the *Russian Messenger* in 1866.

³ *Saint Genet, Comédien et Martyr* is the title of Sartre's 1952 book concerning Genet's semi-autobiographical *Thief Journal (Journal du voleur, 1949)*. The journal depicts various criminals and law enforcers in stages of power struggles and reconciliation. In it, Genet appropriates a Christian terminology of sainthood to describe and execute his crimes: a robbery becomes a ritual, a theft an act of devotion, homosexuality a virtue.