

Getting a grip on time

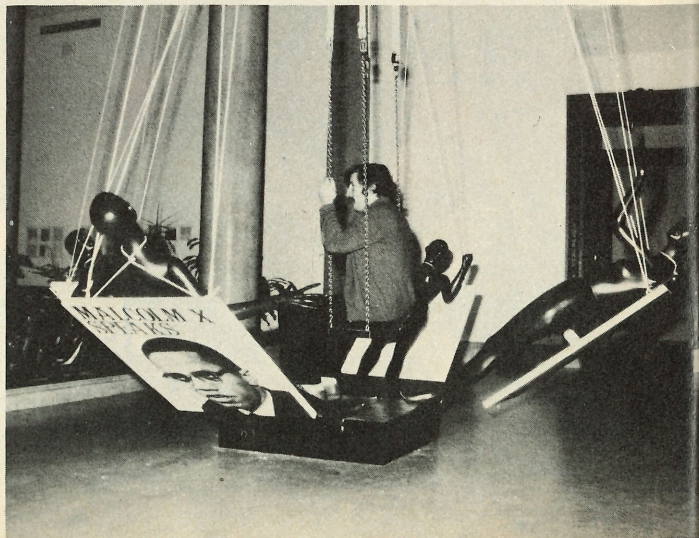
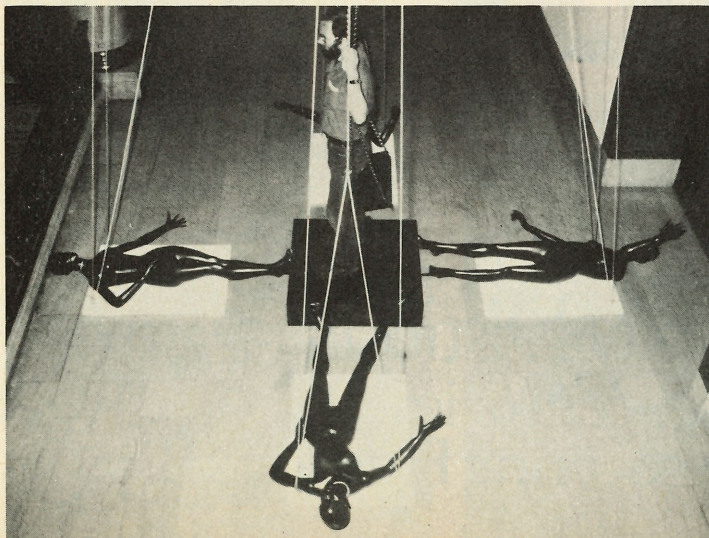
Despite the apparent roughness of their work—often the machine or model or room or videotape they've dreamed up gets no farther than the blueprint stage—the 16 artists whose work appears in the current Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) show, *Yesterday & After*, are much more ambitious than their forefathers. Those forefathers, painters and sculptors both of the present and the past, were and are content with creating art that hangs on the wall or sits on the floor and defines itself in its own terms—simply as art. But these 16 fabricators and inventors have turned to memory and time for their themes. And, as is easily guessed from the title of American artist Alice Aycock's contribution, *The Machine That Makes the World*, they are less interested in the products of art than in creating or recreating worlds. They reach out for pop culture, architecture, archeology, history, myth and biography; it's not surprising that traditional forms of art are not equal to their grasp.

The two-part exhibition, arranged by Normand Thériault and Diana Nemiroff, has brought together, in a rare occurrence for North America, major artists from Europe, the United States and Canada. The show plays intricate games with its own themes of memory and time. The second part, which opened May 7 and is running until June 8, is haunted by memories, even artifacts, of the first. Vancouver artist

Aycock's 'The Machine That Makes the World' (right); the process of 'Raising the Dead,' by Acconci: eating the audience



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Glenn Lewis had marked his site in part one of the show by stealing all the museum's tropical plants and arranging them into an arbor. Asking himself why people create little ornamental gardens in front of their homes, he answered—nostalgia for Eden. So Lewis travelled through Europe and Asia in 1976-77 gathering evidence of this mythic dream in the great gardens of the world (*Maclean's*, Feb. 19, 1979). The not entirely successful passageway of plants—with its less than paradisaical institutional sheen—led viewers through a “metaphorest” of the original garden of Eden into a grouping of photographs of the earthly gardens he had found. During the second half of the exhibition, the plants, back in their usual places, still retained traces of Lewis' “bewilderness.”

Another piece from part one which lingered in the mind while walking through part two, was *The Vertiginous Way*, by French artists Anne and Patrick Poirier. It played on nostalgia like Lewis', but in this case for a past that had never existed. Re-creating an imaginary stairway of the imaginary palace of Nero (called Domus Aurea, a golden palace that could have burned when Rome did), a black charred miniature ruin rose from the ground, running diagonally across the long gallery to end above the head in a corner. Stairways within stairways bore names such as *Little Theatre of the Image of Memory* and *The Wells of Forgetfulness* in typewritten “word drawings” on the wall. The words mimed the stairway, accumulating details as if each one was a building block. Such “architecture of the mind,” according to the artists, plumbs the dreams and unconscious of a collective fantasy of history.

The notion of memory re-creating the past can apply to any work of art—a simple portrait preserves a face. But the Montreal exhibition explores the process of time as well as memory (the

curators confess, for instance, that they are more interested in da Vinci's notebooks, with their biographical notes, inventions, sketches and running history than in Mona Lisa's smile). The work of these 16 artists, whether making up fictional pasts or recording their own lives, actually has a remarkable affinity for the pursuits of *museums*—institutions devoted to preserving the objects and recording the traces of the past. Hanne Darboven of Hamburg, who was included in part one, creates art that is its own catalogue, obsessively documented in 266 drawings which repre-

sent days of her life. Each one seems to repeat the last, composed of endless lines of the same looping letter broken only by arithmetic computations—but does not. This meaningless writing takes time to do and takes time as its subject. Eventually bound in volumes by the artist, the drawings are a perpetually growing autobiographical archive which lends time—and Darboven's own life—the density and heft of library shelves full of reference books.

Other artists in part two of the show are more rigorous with time, carefully regulating the viewer's experience of it

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