

Produit Rien, a new studio and project space, was about to open in the Little Italy neighbourhood of Montreal. And then the crisis hit. Unsure about the future, the owners planned their opening and exhibition launch online.

By Paul Litherland and Karen Trask

Slow Vernissage: Launching a New Studio and Project Space during the Pandemic

Like many artists in central Montreal, we have had to move studios a number of times over the years. Wouldn't it be nice to be somewhere that felt like you wouldn't be asked to move after you've just finished setting up? Near our house was a tofu factory that had been for sale on and off for a few years, and it was the right size. We decided to make an offer. It was February 2019. Getting money together, negotiating the purchase, and planning and executing repairs involved thousands of big and small decisions, all of which meant trouble focusing on everything else—for example, making art, preparing for upcoming exhibitions, and doing paid work. In early January 2020, the last layer of grout went over the tiles and we were faced with the shift from working on the space to working in it.

The building has three sections: two production studios and a project space. After we scraped away a few of the letters of the original signage, Produits Alimentaires Oriental(e), *Produit Rien* was waiting for us. We bought Jo-Anne Balcaen's neon light work *Sooon* and installed it in the window of the project space at the front.

To inaugurate the space, we planned an opening for friends and neighbours to enjoy an evening of art, wine, and food. It was February, and news of the viral outbreak was beginning to appear, but its implications hadn't sunk in.

We invited Donald Goodes to curate an exhibition of works from our archives. Goodes is a Web designer specializing in websites for artists, as well as a published art critic and theorist. He knows us and our works, and he's not afraid to break convention. Through conversations and examining our collection, he selected thirty-two works to be installed in the project and studio spaces. Each of us has a very different art process, and the works often seem at odds. It was easy to imagine a confrontation between our two approaches. Instead of a combative face-off with works resisting each other from opposite sides of the space, Goodes surprised us. The exhibition *All or Nothing* highlighted unexpected connections among our works, which were arranged in thematic groups. In one of these groups, *Creating Dialectic*, Karen's photograph of a rocky, snow-covered field

on handmade paper is bordered by two of Paul's framed images of people falling through blue sky. To paraphrase Goodes, there is a push and a pull between the earth and the sky, and a tension created between the beauty of the illusion and the reality of the moment. In Paul's photographs, the calm, blue sky is disrupted by the wind ripping at clothes and skin. In Karen's piece, there is tension in the way the image dissolves into the treated surface of the paper.

It was mid-March, and on Wednesday the 11th the World Health Organization declared a pandemic. By Friday the 13th, the country had lurched into the surreal state of closures, isolation, and distancing that we continue to negotiate.

We decided to proceed with the launch virtually. We inaugurated the space, *Produit Rien*, with the exhibition *All or Nothing*, on May 8, 2020. A thousand notices were sent via email with a website address where the exhibition could be viewed online and an accompanying text consulted. For the time being, we are encouraging live visits, one person or household at a time, by appointment. So far so good. It's a challenge to present work on the Internet; the flattening of everything into luminous screens privileges the cerebral and the visual. The subtleties of surface details in Karen's paper piece *Wordfield* (2009) are difficult to transmit through a



digital interface. The framing of the image by the technology, the keyboard, the backlit screen, and the location of the computer in a home rather than an exhibition space distract from the appreciation of an object in space. Seeing does not equal feeling. Karen's weavings are about touch and appreciating the textures made by hands folding paper over time.

The response to our launch was immediate and encouraging! The following day, a Saturday, we initiated our adventure with four visitors. The silver lining in this long, slow version of studio-warming is the time and space allowed for a more intimate experience. Visitors can view the exhibition at their leisure and talk to us. We are all starved for some real-time human presence.

There are three spaces in the building, two for our personal use and a front space with street access that we have designated as a project space. We imagine this space as an opening into the unknown—a space for events,

exhibitions, workshops, and presentations. Before the outbreak, we noticed that if we opened the studio door, someone inevitably walked in. Sometimes they were looking for tofu; sometimes they were just curious. It was great.

No one has any idea about the outcome of the pandemic on the economy, or what it will mean for artists continuing to make art in Montreal. Artists are stepping into mid-air, not knowing exactly where their next step will take them. Having an artist's studio integrated into a community normalizes art as an activity. Neither of us had any personal relationship with a living artist while we were growing up. Children playing in the alley stop to ask how we are. Before doing something, you must first imagine it. Our hope is that simply knowing that our studio exists and that people make art in this building will open a future of possible art-making for a new generation.

Stress and excitement can feel very similar, and that is where we are now. We'll be open *Sooon*. ●

II



III



I
Jo-Anne Balcaen, *Sooon* (2003)
Photo: Paul Litherland

II
Installation view, *Tout ou rien* (2020)
Left and right: **Paul Litherland**, *Force Majeure*, 71 x 104 cm each (2010)
Center: **Karen Trask**, *Wordfield II*, 98 x 198.5 cm (2009)
Photo: Paul Litherland

III
Studio view, *Produit Rien* (2020)
From left to right: **Hollywood Dumpster** (2008), 107 x 162 cms; **French Dumpster** (2008), 49 x 69 cm; **French Cloud**, (2008), 49 x 69 cm, **Berlin Cloud** (2008), 107 x 163 cm
Photo: Paul Litherland