

The Turcot Yards: Community Encounters with a Queer Sublime



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"But what was Smith's experience on the turnpike?
Or to put the same question another way, if the turnpike,
airstrips and drill grounds are not works of art, what are they?
—What, indeed, if not empty or 'abandoned,' *situations*?"¹

¹ Michael Fried, quoted by Rebecca Duclos, in "The Topology of Objecthood and Contemporary Art" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Manchester, 2008): 16.

The Turcot Yards, marked visually by the massive concrete presence of the Turcot Interchange and known lovingly by myself and many other Saint Henri residents as "the wasteland," is popularly understood to be one of the largest abandoned spaces in North America. It is also a highly contested area that, far from empty and unused, has played an active role for a diversity of Saint Henri communities over time. The primary context of this paper is the contestation over the yards since 2003, spurred by the Quebec Ministry of Transport's planning and demolition efforts. In light of the MTQ's call for major expropriations, the destruction and redevelopment of the yards, as well as the diversity of community resistance, I have chosen to focus on the importance of the current Interchange as a raised, monumental structure that frames and helps to create the unprogrammed and alternative occupations of the site below. To make this point, I will draw on the site's history throughout the 1960s as a central framing device, calling attention to the Utopian vision of the Turcot Interchange and its relevance for the area's contemporary situation. I will also include parts of interviews from friends and neighbors in Saint Henri regarding the histories of the site's uses and meanings, focusing particularly on its contemporary import for an anti-essentialist, queer, anti-capitalist community.

One strategy that offers potential for reading and writing on experiences of the Turcot Yards is an investigation of the queer sublime. Drawing from Elizabeth Wilson's reading of interstitial space, Christopher Reed's idea of the imminence of queer space, Julie Podmore's analysis of the importance of places "of difference" for queer communities in Montréal, as well as Rebecca Duclos' understanding of the feminist sublime and the topology of objecthood, I will propose that the existing Turcot Interchange be read through the queer sublime as a model of encountering and allowing for a radical alterity. Through this model, I want to propose a replacement of the framing of the yards as an "abandoned" site with an understanding of the personal and communal experiences of "abandon" to landscape as thing and event which Duclos describes. The concept of the queer sublime that I will work through has the potential of positioning the Turcot Yards as a place in which the multiplicity of communal and individual identities of

Saint-Henri residents are simultaneously maintained and suspended, but never fully represented, through an experience of longing within the site.

Turcot Yard employees posing for 6th Victory Bond Drive, 1944

Turcot Roundhouse, Photographer Unknown, 1943



The Turcot Yards was the heart of the Canadian train system throughout the first half of the 20th century, maintained by the Grand Trunk Railway and later the Canadian National. The Turcot Plant affiliated with the Yards, owned and managed by the Canada Car Company (later the Canadian Car & Foundry), had been a major source of jobs for the area since its construction in 1905, a source that grew over time with the expansion from wooden freight, passenger and street car equipment to steel castings and under-frame cars, and, during World War II, aviation equipment. The roundhouse dispatched around 128 trains daily, which increased to 138 during WWII.² As such, the Turcot's economic and social role in the industrial port neighborhood of Saint Henri connected the site to the daily lives of local workers and their families. By the end of the 1950s, the vitality of the local industrial base was noticeably diminishing, due in part to the increased reliance on automobile transport and the opening of the Saint Lawrence Freeway in 1959. The '50s saw both the reduction of the train dispatch to 215 a week as well as the first employee strike.³ The area's landscape changed drastically between 1961

² Bianca Scliar Mancini, "Turcot Yards: On the Ephemerality of Physical Presence," presented as part of the 2008 conference on Montréal as Palimpsest: Architecture, Community, Change: 12. http://art-history.concordia.ca/institute_site/conf08_palimpsest/papers/Bianca_Scliar_Mancini.pdf

³ Ibid.

and '67, when the CN closed down the roundhouse and a majority of the tracks for the construction of the Turcot Interchange, which was unveiled by the MTQ two days before 'Expo 67. The Interchange itself was constructed to connect Autoroutes 15 (the Decarie), 20 (Jean-Lesage), 720 (Ville-Marie) and the Champlain Bridge, each expressway section built at an average height of 18 metres and in total utilizing 170,000 cubic metres of concrete and 19,000 tons of steel.⁴ At the time, the project cost \$24.5 million dollars.⁵

As Andre Lortie points out in the catalogue for the Canadian Center for Architecture exhibit, *The 60s: Montréal Thinks Big*, "examining the 1960s...means considering the roots of contemporary urban conditions, so thoroughly do the plans and achievements of the decade continue to impose their logic on today's cities."⁶ The Turcot Interchange was built in an era when Montréal's future seemed boundless, at least to Mayor Jean Drapeau. In context of preparation for Expo '67 and ambitious projections for urban growth, which predicted a population of 4.8 million by 1981 and 7 million by the year 2000, plans for road construction expanded to include not only the widening of existing streets but a vast network of high-speed, elevated and interlocking highways.⁷ These thoroughfares had been advocated by the United States Bureau of Public Roads and across Europe since the 1930s, taking precedence through the law signed by President Eisenhower in 1956 that called for the creation of the Interstate Highway System. From the 1940s leading into the '60s, these expressway systems implied the future, not only in popular media but as a major governmental attempt to rationally organize the city's growth *before* it happened.⁸ In 1966, the Montréal Star published an

⁴ Patrick Lejtenyi, "Life, death and Turcot," *The Mirror* (22-28 Jan 2008). <http://www.montrealmirror.com/2009/012209/news2.html>

⁵ Ibid.

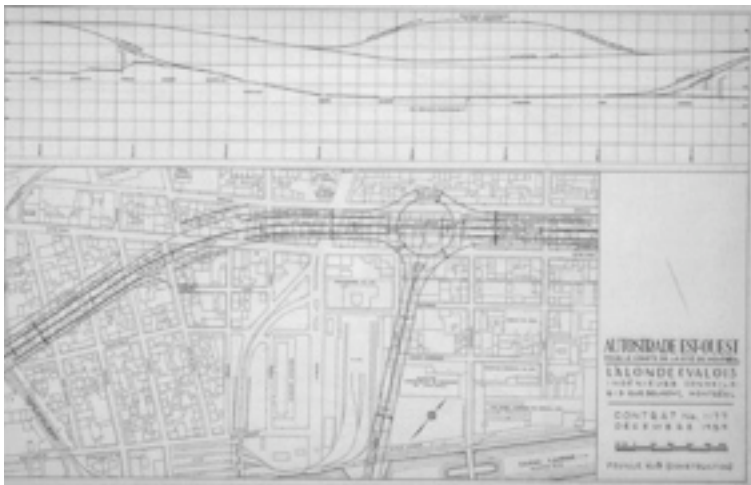
⁶ André Lortie, *The 60s: Montréal Thinks Big* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2004): 21.

⁷ Ibid, 85.

⁸ Lortie, 86.

aerial photograph of Turcot construction with a caption describing the Interchange as a "dream development of the future."⁹

The aerial image on the cover of the 1948 City Planning report conveys this new type of expressway "that would 'float' above the city, practically independent of it."¹⁰ The various phases of the project all involved the visual strategy of superimposed lines over aerial photographs and city models, which served to smoothly erase sections of existing neighborhoods at a comfortable distance. On the ground level, however,



City Planning Department

Impact study of the Trans-Canada highway in Southwest Montréal, Lalonde & Valois, 1959

City of Montréal, 1948

construction of the expressway system "caused much more devastation than these illustrations reveal."¹¹ It has been said that more than 850 homes and businesses were originally demolished to make way for the Ville-Marie Expressway alone, in a project that represents, in Lortie's words,

⁹ Andy Riga, "Reconstructing the Turcot," *The Gazette* (17 April 2009), <http://www.canada.com/montrealgazette/Reconstructing+Turcot/1508121/story.html>

¹⁰ Lortie, 136.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

all of the most appalling aspects of top-down, voluntarist planning: [including] collusion between the different levels of government in a project to destroy a working-class neighbourhood, devised in the name of economic development, justified by vague, technocratic arguments, subsidized by public funds, and serving—indirectly and unavowedly—the growth of private capital.¹²

Though this certainly sounds familiar to the current issues surrounding Turcot planning, the Interchange was constructed through a type of vision particular to Expo '67 and its theme, *Man and his World*. As such, megaprojects like the highway system and the Turcot Interchange participate in Montréal's broader lineage of Utopian urbanism, one that, as Elizabeth Wilson describes of Utopian inclinations, has historically tended towards the authoritarian in its "prescriptions for every detail of life."¹³

Still, the '60s top-down approach to the freeway system cannot entirely be divorced from how the Interchange is perceived today. From above, the Interchange could be understood through what Wilson discusses as a non-event in her article, "Against Utopia: The Romance of Indeterminate Spaces." The expressway system is most simply used by drivers to get from one place to another. For Montréal residents outside of Saint Henri, it is the void between home and work, and for tourists, the threshold to the "necessary" parts of the city, those that are "cleansed, sanitized and rearranged for the [pleasure] of the tourist gaze."¹⁴ As a journey, some may experience the interchange from above as if "there is *nothing* in between" or nothing underneath.¹⁵ In an interview with a woman who lives in the Tanneries neighborhood just off the yards, she articulated that while the site was designed and built for the activity that happens above, for those who live in the neighborhood it is about the activity that happens below

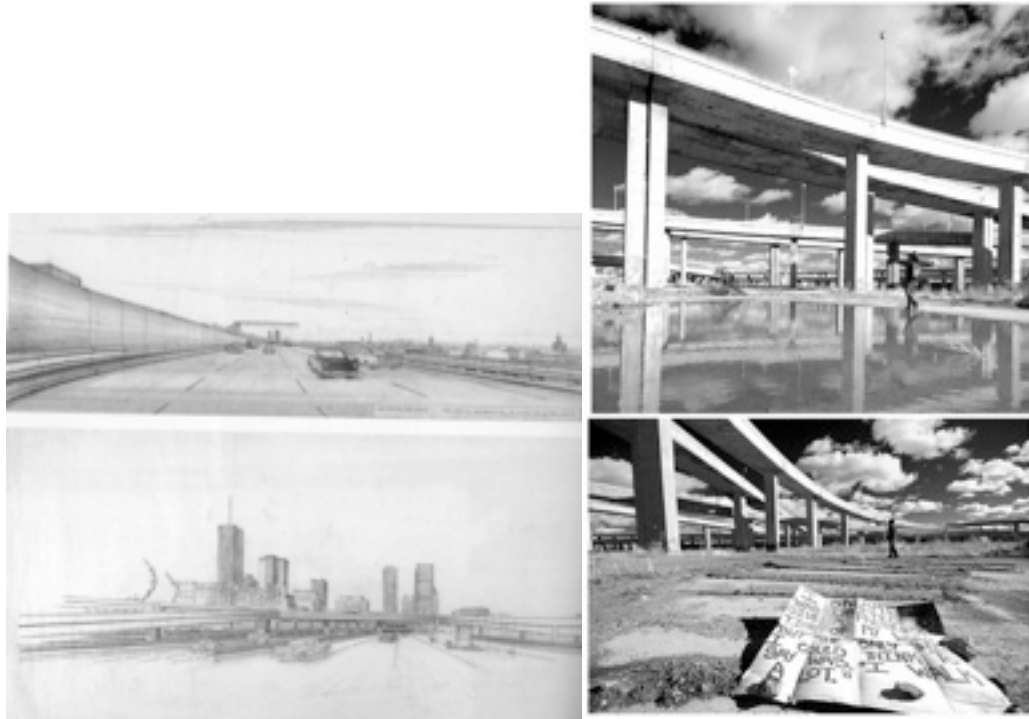
¹² Ibid.

¹³ Elizabeth Wilson, "Against Utopia: The Romance of Indeterminate Spaces," in *Embodied Utopias: Gender, Social Change and the Modern Metropolis*, edited by Amy Bingaman et al (New York: Routledge, 2002): 258.

¹⁴ Ibid, 257.

¹⁵ Ibid.

which, in her words, "just gets passed by." What continues to emerge from underneath the architectural product of this vision, though, is the space unplanned for; the interstitial space where, as Michel de Certeau elaborated, marginal communities "weave a language as they make a path through the city...the place in which they 'poach' on the preserves of the powerful and manufacture a silent...resistance."¹⁶



East-West Expressway, City Planning Department, 1966, 1963

Photographs by Karen Spencer

For many Saint Henri residents, daily life is "intimately entwined" with the Turcot Yards.¹⁷ While in certain ways, the site is perceived and used like a public park, the lack of overt programming and design make a noticeable difference. It is known as a place to go for walks, for dog-owners and bicyclists, but it is also occupied by graffiti and public artists, the homeless, and urban explorers—in reality, all of these uses are illegal, and are considered trespassing. Friends and neighbors mention a wide variety of individual uses

¹⁶ Michel de Certeau, quoted by Wilson, 259.

¹⁷ Julie Podmore, "Lesbians in the Crowd: gender, sexuality and visibility along Montreal's Boul. St-Laurent," in *Gender, Place and Culture* 8:4 (2001): 339.

and social gatherings, including but certainly not limited to drinking morning tea with your partner, dragging couches from street corners into the underpass, playing with your children, having bonfires, taking first kisses, building museums in the sewer, playing music, setting off fireworks, and staging sexy photoshoots. I have dressed up with friends in drag, thrown ribbons from the overpass at cars below, tagged "lost boys" and meaningless directional arrows in hot pink paint, fell asleep on couches, sat around, made movies, gone on first and second dates, fell in love, hidden from the police, gone exploring and gotten lost. The yards have been a magical place for me, but I have also watched it be used like a back yard, like a street corner, like the place in the middle of the neighborhood and the place in between neighborhoods. The area is a shared and open space that facilitates imaginative uses precisely because its current purpose is ambiguous, because it does not choreograph any one particular mode of occupation.

The Turcot Yards may not be an obvious geographical choice for making the argument of a "queer" presence, but it is also not exactly my goal to claim this territory for a queer community. Following Julie Podmore's 2001 study of lesbian visibility on Boulevard Saint Laurent, I am interested in how to "de-emphasize" the rhetoric and logic of territorial occupation that is so crucial to geography and urban studies, an emphasis that consistently renders queer populations invisible.¹⁸ For marginalized communities with little formal spaces of their own, and for those who actively resist the programming of formal spaces, interstitial sites such as the Turcot Yards are crucial to shaping non-normative modes of subjectivity, community, sociability and "even desire." But as with territoriality, I hesitate to discuss resistant spatial practices in terms of desire-based language alone, a discourse made increasingly popular by the contemporary surge of academic interest in the Situationists and other '60s practitioners; as Donald Morton asks, "what kind of subject can afford to explain politics and the social world strictly in terms of 'desire' except the subject whose 'needs' are already met?"¹⁹ Like Morton, I don't believe that queer "radicality" is possible without an acknowledgement of class, and find

¹⁸ Ibid, 335.

¹⁹ Donald Morton, "The Class Politics of Queer Theory," in *College English* 58:4 (April 1996): 475.

that an anti-capitalist approach is necessary for queer praxis.²⁰ This strategy becomes particularly important in consideration of the Saint Henri community, for while the majority of residents I have interviewed identify to some degree as queer, this is not necessarily the primary signifier of identity. This community is not only also anti-capitalist, but consistently escapes essentialization in its multiplicity. As with the yards themselves, I don't think that I could or would ever want to fully map my community in Saint Henri. To say that the Turcot Yards is a queer space, then, indicates that social groups which do not fit into the city's imagined binaries can create a realm in which difference is an integral element of social interaction, and, at the risk of sounding cliché, money is not an issue.²¹ While differences are often "subsumed in other, formally queer spaces," the yards allow for a "more complex experience and performance of identities."²² It is a place in which the capitalist logic of property as well as "sex/gender systems [are] undermined (or at least challenged)" by the absence of any dominant program.²³

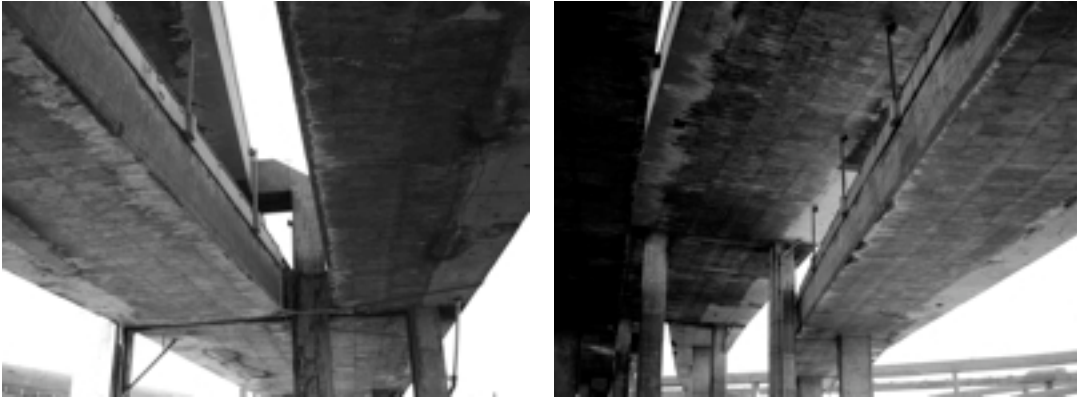
But it remains impossible to separate experiences of the yards from the visual and material experience of the overarching Interchange, a situation that pushes, along with Rebecca Duclos' 2008 doctoral dissertation "The Topology of Objecthood and Contemporary Art," for a reading through the logic of the sublime. Connecting "sublime" to its roots in the Latin *sublimis*, a compound of *sub-* (under; up to) and *limin* (or threshold), one can immediately connect the sublime with the literal experience of looking up at the Interchange from below, as well the exalted aspirations of '60s city planners and the site's role as a threshold, or in-between space. Duclos' writing is useful as it connects models of the sublime to a re-working of objecthood, one that draws on the oddly repressed or marginalized details of Michael Fried's 1967 formulation in "Art and

²⁰ Ibid, 472.

²¹ Podmore, 338.

²² Ibid, 343.

²³ Ibid, 344.



Objecthood" to find objecthood as "a field (both of vision and action)," a strategy that takes into account experiences of space as both "thing" and "event."²⁴ In doing so, Duclos revisits broader spatial concerns of 1960s artists and writers, including debates regarding "ideas of non object-based art making, interventions in public space and the urban field, and the privileging of subjective experience over the modernist exaltation of what Fried notoriously called pure 'presentness.'"²⁵ As Duclos illustrates, Fried's condemnation of the theatricality of minimalist art objects, translated generally as a "rejection of the phenomenology of an embodied subjectivity," can also be read as a hostility towards the sublime experience.²⁶ This position paradoxically provided Fried with the opportunity to passionately, if negatively, articulate modes of objecthood that lean towards the sublime.²⁷ Duclos' work offers this study a way to gesture towards the embodied experiences of the architecture of the Turcot Yards as topological and potentially sublime, as broader (physically, subjectively) than, but in close relationship to the "structure" of the interchange itself.²⁸

As an interesting parallel for this study, Duclos focuses on the characterization of the sublime underlying Fried's attempt to denounce Tony Smith's by-now famous

²⁴ Duclos, 6.

²⁵ Ibid, 13.

²⁶ Ibid, 16.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, 22.

experience of the New Jersey Turnpike (from above) and the surrounding post-industrial landscape.²⁹ Through Smith's highway drive, Fried (negatively) offers up the "other" kind of objecthood that Duclos recuperates and explores—presenting objecthood as thing and event, as topological and as experience itself:

It is the explicitness...the sheer persistence with which the experience presents itself as directed at him from outside (on the turnpike from outside the car) that simultaneously makes him a subject—makes him subject—and establishes the experience itself as something like that of an object, or rather, of objecthood.³⁰

When paired with other concerns developing throughout the 1960s, regarding the agency of the subject and its manners of active embodiment, this objecthood opens up into questions regarding "a body to space relationship (subjecthood to objecthood) characterised by a topology of durational, mobile, peripatetic experience."³¹ Fried's description of "the endlessness, objectlessness, of the approach or onrush or perspective" in Smith's experience also results in linking this topological objecthood, and its relationship to the subject, to sublimity.³² His account of Smith's drive is riddled with the language of the sublime, found through his "almost breathless, rapid-fire" use of words such as "*abandoned, enormous, derelict, recession, illumined, onrushing, distancing, and isolating*."³³ Following "a modernist analytic that prefers objects to objecthood, instantaneous presentness to presence, the picture to the picturesque, the beautiful to the sublime," Fried attempts to contain the sublime elements of Smith's experience by equating it with the situation of the literalist artwork in a gallery space.³⁴ But as Fried

²⁹ Ibid, 14.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 23.

³² Ibid, 17.

³³ Ibid, 14.

³⁴ Ibid, 35.

himself acknowledged, Smith saw his experience as impossible to frame, to turn into or replace with a work of art—a characteristic feature of the sublime.

Experiences of the Turcot Yards themselves, even when separated as much as possible from the overarching interchange, gesture towards the sublime, in particular as a site that from the ground level seems impossible to grasp with an analytical distance, to accurately represent visually or verbally. There is a disruption of one's physical and sensual stability here, a product of the collage-like formlessness and chaotic nature of the spaces literally leftover from major planning projects.³⁵ A friend recently described the site as both immensely beautiful and grotesquely monstrous, emphasizing that no map of the yards could in any way encompass the visceral experience of its territory. From the west side of the site, the urban subject is confronted with an unusually vast area of open



space, lined in the distance by long, unmarked buildings, rows of unused lights and beset with incomprehensible objects. In the winter, snow collected from other parts of the city is heaped into tall, artificial mountains and, as these slowly melt, lost or discarded objects from the city's streets and sidewalks are released, leaving clues to an unsolvable mystery. Small lakes of old snow and rain water are lined at their shores by scraps of paper, rusty parts of tools, snatches of fur lining, single gloves and a diverse array of plastic bits. Though some of these materials retain their original, brilliant color, most soak up the same muddy brown as the rocks and dirt, lending the space's diverse flooring material an

³⁵ Ibid, 69.

uncannily homogenous quality. In the warmer months especially, these odd assortments of things are found amongst the area's unexpected natural growth, which ranges from tall, unruly grass, bright goldenrod, medicinal herbs such as mullein and echinacea, to a slew of plants many residents have yet been able to name. Towards the edges this expanse of space is beset with strange hills, broken down piles of rock, ambiguous signage, and the occasional fox, bordered as well by the dense forest of the Saint Jacques cliff (nicknamed "spider forest" by some for its eerily vast accumulation of webs). In between the yards themselves and the forest is the old service road, so rarely used anymore by automobile traffic that its uncluttered, asphalt surface seems strikingly stark in comparison with the surrounding grounds. And, finally, it is from this complex and overwhelming setting that the monumental Interchange emerges, its colossal supports and overarching planks dominating the landscape.

Before directly addressing the potential sublimity of the interchange as experienced from below, it is necessary to elaborate on its relationships to two elements that have already been introduced: experiences of 1960s minimalist artworks and the place for and role of queer embodiment on site. While the connection of the Turcot Interchange from above to Tony Smith's experience on the New Jersey Turnpike may be clear, Dell Upton's approach to the "materiality of landscape" and "bodily practice" can help to connect this discussion to the yards below by drawing (positively, unlike Fried) on the "theatricality" of the Minimalist object as a potential model for architecture.³⁶ Upton sees the physical relationship between viewer and minimalist art object, with particular reference to Smith's six-foot *Die* (1962), as representative of and drawing attention to everyday encounters that call for a mode of identity construction marked by a collaboration between site and body.³⁷ Similarly moving from object to body to its relationship with space, Christopher Reed's understanding of queer space as imminent can join with Upton's analysis of the "theatricality" of everyday encounters to point to the queer everyday that takes place in the yards. Insisting that queerness is not just

³⁶ Dell Upton, "Architecture in Everyday Life," in *New Literary History* 33:4 (Autumn 2002): 708, 716.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 715.

constituted in the body of the queer (in his/her inhabitation, in his/her gaze) but is also an actual, lived spatial product, Reed uses the idea of imminence to articulate queer space as "space in the process of, literally, *taking place*, of claiming territory," noting its threatening qualities for both advocates and opponents.³⁸ Understanding the interchange as part of a queer spatial relationship becomes possible through an extension of the idea of imminence, pushing it to also mean something that hangs suspended over us, something ready to fall or happen, the act of being attentive to, the act of coming near, approaching, converging. Through an introduction of these models, one can start to see how encounters with the interchange can be understood as a necessary and positive part of everyday experience, and how the imminence of the interchange (its looming qualities, its current potential to decay and crumble) could be related to both the queer production of space and experiences of the sublime.

A critical approach to these models' shortcomings, primarily rooted in their focus on territory, can also provide this study with an entranceway into alternative conceptions of the sublime and their relationships to experiences of the Turcot Interchange from below. Drawing again on Podmore's methodology, one can understand the ways in which Reed's focus on territorial occupation could serve to further invisibilize a queer, collective presence in sites like the yards, areas that are considered "abandoned." Reed's analysis of queer imminence focuses on architectural monuments, and he recognizes these not simply as formal structures but as "collective and ad hoc interventions into the landscape," gesturing as well towards the body of work produced on lesbian identity and pedestrian mobility.³⁹ Reed notes that the standard methods for scholarly documentation of the "historical formation, physical boundaries, and social structures" of queer neighborhoods privilege verbal and quantifiable data, overlooking issues of symbolic space and serving to homogenize queer space, but he unfortunately sinks into similar academic patterns.⁴⁰ Though he briefly mentions issues of class and the potential for

³⁸ Christopher Reed, "Imminent Domain: Queer Space in the Built Environment," in *Art Journal* 55:4 (Winter 1996): 64.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

queer identities resistant to capitalism, Reed does not really problematize the idea of a singularly queer relationship to architectural space and its representation.⁴¹ While the idea of imminence can be taken further, his article unfortunately relies on static and simplified notions of territoriality, privileging the monument and the physical traces of queer presence, as well as emphasizing the necessity for queer bodies to make a mark on the landscape.

Upton's views on the experience of Minimalist art, and its relevance for everyday life and identity formation, are also similarly singular and universal (if not to a much greater degree), and he fails to conceptualize the ways in which differentiated and non-normative subjects and bodies could encounter such work. Quoting from Carl Andre, Upton articulates Minimalist sculpture as something that attempts to "seize and hold" the space that it occupies, which forces the viewer in turn to "surrender or fight back, learning something about him- or herself in the process."⁴² Drawing vaguely on anthropologists and psychologists, Upton imagines this process as representative of the everyday formation of subject agency, but primarily through the drive for territoriality:

Like other animals, we humans are territorial...and we tend to maintain a relatively constant personal distance...In humans, the formation of this buffer is an important stage in the process of self-definition. Some of our earliest forms of self-awareness arise from our understanding that we are bounded objects in a space that extends beyond us. By differentiating self and non-self in this elementary way, we gain a sense of agency...Taken together, our bodies and their protective bubbles help to define our selves by giving us an idea of 'self-coherence' as physical entities with limits and the power to act and to be acted upon.⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Carl Andre, quoted by Upton, 716.

⁴³ Upton, 716-7.



While recognizing that these boundaries can be "remarkably fluid," Upton misses the complexity not only of identities and communities, but also the multiplicity of ways in which these complex subjects can relate through architectural objects to space.⁴⁴ He also fails to recognize or elaborate on, as Duclos insists in her critique of Fried, the issues with and implications of simply replacing lived, everyday experience in a landscape with that of a gallery, supposedly void of complicated, overlapping social histories and modes of occupation.

Duclos' use of feminist accounts of the "sublime picturesque" in relation to ideas developing through the 1960s on subject/space relations moves beyond the singularity of territorial occupation as identity formation to stress instead "the dynamic suspension of one's subjecthood within the 'incomprehensible materiality' of experience."⁴⁵ While the Kantian schema that Upton's model can be seen to follow prescribes that the "potentially formless and chaotic underside of sublimity... [is] to be quickly overcome by the mind and its powers of reason," other models propose a sublime experience in which the subject no longer stands in "superior" relation to the surrounding landscape.⁴⁶ As opposed to Upton's view of the self/other relationship as a struggle, Duclos draws on Barbara Freeman's feminist re-reading of the sublime, which pushes not only for a model

⁴⁴ Ibid, 717.

⁴⁵ Duclos, 6.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 70.

of "non-dominance" but the possibility for the subject to experience a confluence of self and space, an intensified merger with both architectural object and the surrounding landscape.⁴⁷ In an interview with a resident who lives a few blocks from the yards, she described experiences of the interchange as "a sobering exercise," rooted in the ways in which the expressways and the "concrete pillars striding the landscape of the wasteland" act simultaneously as terrifying structures and as elements that make the landscape oddly "comforting and homey." Because of this experience, she elaborated that her notion of distance is drastically altered by both landscape and the place of the "monolithic" interchange within it. To articulate this phenomena, she used examples of walking through the yards, but also of sitting with a friend inside one of the high windows carved out from the concrete train tunnel underneath the interchange; in this in-between position, she felt both threatened by either side (the close, oncoming trains, the stationary, interchange columns as well as the possibility of the police hiding behind them) and also somehow a part of the structure itself. In light of such experiences, it seems clear that the feminist sublime can help take Reed's idea of queer space as imminent beyond straightforward territorial occupation, bringing the queer imminence of the interchange into focus instead as a sublime suspension, productive threat, subjective attentiveness and potential convergence.

The politics of the feminist and possibly queer sublime works well with what I have described as the unprogrammed, interstitial space of the yards and its importance for alternative, queer communities. While the motivations behind the existing Turcot Interchange are recognized by residents as being in distinct opposition to community values, as a structure imposed from outside the community, there is something positive and necessary that emerges from a queer relationship with the spaces leftover and the looming presence of the interchange. As another interviewee from the Tanneries related, "the site is central to our community...as a space that confronts you with the future," both physically and "with opposing views of the future as well as our own. If this is the space that's fed to us by those with power, then we better figure out how to dwell here and how

⁴⁷ Ibid.

to love it." Reed's connection between idea of queer imminence and strategies of spatial renovation, as opposed to restoration, is useful here, as he analyzes the ways in which

Photo by "Neath"

Photo by Julien Roumagnac



queer space *takes place* by transforming "what the dominant culture has abandoned so that old and new are in explicit juxtaposition."⁴⁸ Again moving away from the need to territorialize, a queer relationship to the yards is of course a mode of occupation, but one that allows the interchange to remain a desired, if monstrous, other. The objects of "rapture" in the sublime experience of the Interchange and its place in the yards do not necessarily present us with a "struggle for mastery," a need to dominate or contain the site's excess – they are allowed instead to exist in a position of accepted and potentially longed for "otherness."⁴⁹ While Upton's model of self/other is relevant to this relationship, the duality is not so simple. To follow Reed a little further, the queer reclamation of devalued spaces such as the yards and the interchange can tactically expose "the structure of assumptions undergirding normative values," but in terms of the alternative sublime, it can also allow for an alliance of "receptivity and constant attention to that which makes meaning infinitely open and ungovernable."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Reed, 68.

⁴⁹ Duclos, 70.

⁵⁰ Reed, 68; Barbara Freeman, quoted by Duclos, 70.

While the idea of the sublime merging of self and space does have relevance for experiences of the yards, Duclos also introduces the potential for sublime experiences to involve a calculated *inattention* to object and landscape, as a counterpart to the "constant attention" outlined above.⁵¹ While this model remains in opposition to both the detached or disinterested subject/object relation, and the rational, arguably masculinist and heteronormative subject position of the Kantian sublime, it also does not necessitate a complete "abandon" to the object of rapture, the interchange. This version of the sublime



encounter with the interchange, one that pushed for a particular attentiveness, a "calculated inattention" can more aptly describe the majority of the local queer community's relationship to the interchange. It also helps to explain in part why a lot of the interviews were brief and a little evasive, even when the subjects were close friends of mine and live directly on the yards (either in the Tanneries neighborhood or just south in the Fattal buildings between Courcelle and Saint Remi). Though these interviewees are known to spend a good deal of time in the site (individually, socially and as artists), and acknowledge that they *love* the yards, for lack of a better word, in one way or another, many felt as if they either had very little to say about the site, or very little that they could express. This lack of representation is matched in interviews by the fluctuating presence of the interchange: in one of the longer, more verbose interviews, a

⁵¹ Duclos, 71.

friend described the strange way in which the interchange seems at times to be monumental and invasive, and at others sort of disappear or blend into the background. While these residents come face to face with the interchange every day, the type of vision directed to it could be better described as dedifferentiated, digressive, or indirect.⁵² It is this mode of (not quite) looking that, as Duclos explains, characterizes the shift from object to field, but is also part of the history of queer spatial production that Reed mentions, one that resists accommodating "the eyes of outsiders" by drawing forward a "low imageability," an "antilook."⁵³

This shift from object to field, this "other" type of objecthood and its "necessary 'rift' between what is sensed and what is said...points precisely to the inability to express or translate the true potency of the sublime experience."⁵⁴ Expressed another way, the concept of the queer, sublime experience as characterized by an "indirect" vision lends itself to the difficulty of describing, and perhaps the impossibility of framing, the longing for, the ambivalence towards and the complexity of experiences within the Turcot Yards, as well as the complexity of the subjects, the community itself. As Duclos writes on this paradox, drawing from Timothy Gould's re-reading of the sublime, "the communicability of the sublime experience involves the expression of an intensity that in essence defies language."⁵⁵ In Freeman's words,

the sublime involves an encounter with a radical alterity that remains unassimilable to representation. Such an encounter marks the very limits of the representable, for it entails the question of symbolizing an event that we cannot represent not only because it was never fully present, but because it presents the subject with an unrecuperable excess of excess.⁵⁶

⁵² Ibid.

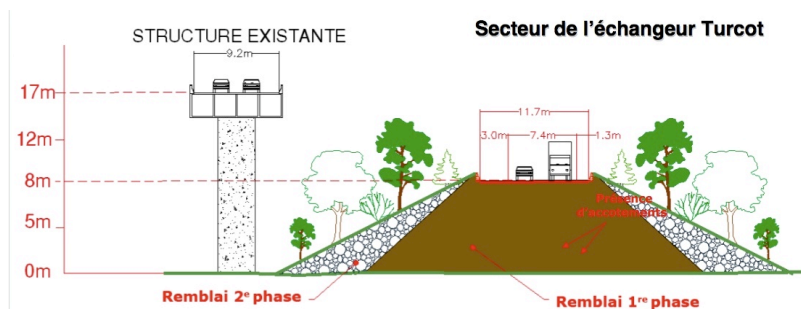
⁵³ Ibid; Reed, 65.

⁵⁴ Duclos, 71-2.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 73.

⁵⁶ Freeman, quoted by Duclos, 105.

Theorizing the shifts between attention and inattention, immersion in and separation from space, Duclos looks to the idea of *psychasthemic suspension* in space to picture a cyclical, looping relationship as a new shape of the sublime, one that moves "in and out of the material and the immaterial, the subjective and the objective, the physical and the psychical without overcoming or succumbing to either extreme but remaining suspended within the *salto mortale* of material and mental congress."⁵⁷ Duclos, along with Elizabeth Grosz, pictures this fluctuating, mutually informing relationship of subject and space as a Möbius strip, a shape that recalls for me not only the intertwining expressway system at the interchange, but the movements of people and communities in the yards below.⁵⁸ It is a model, as Grosz writes, that can help to think of the subject "in terms of the rotation of impossible shapes in illegible spaces."⁵⁹ In "illegible" spaces such as the yards, ones that mark the "limits of representation," the convergence between subject and the topology of objecthood pushes forward the limitlessness of the subject's imagination through a "dynamic indeterminacy."⁶⁰



As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, the Quebec Ministry of Transport bought the majority of the Turcot Yards from the Canadian National in 2003, and currently plan to demolish and replace the existing Turcot Interchange in a 1.5 billion

⁵⁷ Duclos, 74-5.

⁵⁸ Duclos, 75.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, quoted by Duclos, 75.

⁶⁰ Duclos, 73.

dollar, seven-year megaproject. These plans envision the destruction of not only over two hundred homes from the surrounding neighborhood, with only three months rent for compensation, but also the interstitial spaces of the Yards. The first stage of the project involves first replacing the interchange with a new expressway system, similar to the original but with the principal difference of being lowered closer to the ground, supported by earthbound embankments.⁶¹ Most residents are worried that "the project will create an unhealthy six-year dust storm, that the lower highways will belch more carbon dioxide at a lower, neighborhood level and that increasingly rare affordable housing will disappear...they fear that a poor but cherished neighborhood will disappear."⁶² Lowering the highway down from its pillars and demolishing the original interchange also eradicates the history of the site from the 1960s, the Utopian vision and destructive tendencies of urban planning written into the cracks of the concrete. Ironically, most Montréal residents recognize that the erasure the current plans call for serves to allow the MTQ to "repeat past mistakes," as put by Jean Decarie, a retired urban planner and member of the Turcot Think Tank.⁶³ As Pieter Sijpkens points out, the interchange is repairable, despite the advancing age that its concrete is already showing. While those who are looking for alternatives, like Pieter, see the Turcot as "150 to 200 problems" to deal with, the MTQ "sees it as one mega-problem. And Montréal has had a very poor record on megaprojects."⁶⁴

⁶¹ Lejtenyi.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Riga.

⁶⁴ Pieter Sijpkens, quoted by Riga.



While there are several different groups from Saint Henri cooperating to resist the MTQ plans, including Mobilization Turcot and Cazalais Libre, there is often disagreement on the degree to which "negotiating" with the MTQ is possible or even desirable, though without a doubt I would say that it is necessary. A major issue that I have come across in my experiences at protests and meetings this year is the split between the more liberal resistance, who organizes sidewalk protests with police cooperation, speeches from NDP officials, and tends to trust the ability of MTQ human relations representatives to make a change, and those who want perhaps more simply to express their anger, dismay, frustration, and, in any way possible, gain attention to the site and its role for the neighborhood in order to protest the repetition of history inherent in current plans. At stake in this split, I would argue, is the draw of the yards for marginalized communities which, as I hope to have conveyed, is the unrepresentable recuperation of architectural insertions such as the interchange into an everyday, interstitial sphere. As Upton points out in his reading of de Certeau, "everyday practices operate in the interstices that power's strategies, no matter how all-encompassing they aim to be, cannot master. Everyday life raids institutional fortresses, undermining and challenging their totalizing ambitions."⁶⁵ The appeal of the yards for a queer, anti-capitalist, and generally anarchist population is the ability it provides for employing tactics, "short-term raids on power as opposed to strategic assaults from long-established positions."⁶⁶ In de Certeau's words, "a tactic insinuates itself into the other's place,

⁶⁵ Upton, 714.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety...It has at its disposal no base...[these are] the victories of the 'weak' over the 'strong.'"⁶⁷



Throughout this paper, I have attempted to represent, while recognizing the impossibility of such an endeavor, the importance of the yards for a queer, anti-capitalist community in Saint Henri, but I also similarly want to question whether any form of urban planning can leave room for the unplanned, the spontaneous, or Foucault's "event."⁶⁸ Though the MTQ plans do not recognize or allow for the kind of complex, intimate relationship formed with the yards outlined above, or for the unplanned, imaginative life that unfolds in the interstices, the design proposals for the repair and support of the Interchange's infrastructure that emerged from Sijpkens' design studio at McGill certainly can. The simplicity of the designs' retro-fitted under-deck arches would make the demolition of the existing site and the expropriation of residents unnecessary, as well as saving public funds and engaging smaller, local companies in the process. By keeping the original Interchange intact, supported by steel beams and arches, the designs of Pieter and his students also allow, at least temporarily, for the yards to exist as they are, as interstitial and unprogrammed; a living document of the physical and economic changes the area has undergone and a recognition of the ways in which local communities live with, adapt to and resist the interference of top-down planning. As Elizabeth Wilson writes,

⁶⁷ De Certeau, quoted by Upton, 714.

⁶⁸ Wilson, 258.

I no longer want to hear about plans and solutions, because I do not believe we can formulate such ideas until we have heard the susurrations of voices bubbling up from within the hidden city, and understood more about the ways in which so many different kinds of women [or queers] use the actually existing city.⁶⁹

Plans to repair the Turcot Interchange allow, for the moment, for these voices to keep bubbling. But as current resistance movements that cooperate with the MTQ reveal, this "susurrations of voices" is difficult if not impossible to incorporate into the current system for urban planning, and the feeble attempts at somewhat secretive, sporadic and personal (rather than collective) consultations with residents as well as the one, major meeting of the upcoming BAPE (Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement) cannot solve this problem alone. But, thankfully, Saint Henri residents continue to talk out of turn, and continue to move protests from sidewalks into the street. At this point, as Jacob Larsen wrote on *Spacing Montréal*, the community's "bias against the project as proposed and [our] suspicion of the MTQ's process must be as palpable as a mouthful of exhaust."⁷⁰ In looking through the yards for a language adequate to these mysteries of a city's gaps, I appreciate particularly Wilson's emphasis that the search be "ever-unfulfilled."⁷¹ I hope to continue talking with friends and neighbors about the area, to continue pulling together processes of storytelling through the logic of the queer sublime, as a mode of local resistance to the indifference and disruption of corporatized urban planning and development.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 261.

⁷⁰Jacob Larsen, "Uncovering Turcot's future (under a mountain of paper): BAPE documents reviewed," in *Spacing Montreal* (26 March 2009). <http://spacingmontreal.ca/2009/03/26/uncovering-turcots-future-under-a-mountain-of-paper-bape-documents-reviewed/>

⁷¹ Wilson, 262.

Postscript



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