

David Tomas

## **An Economy of Discursive Fields: Lot 94, La Mirage, and POPPOSITIONS 2015.**

The distinction is stark and ironic: POPPOSITIONS 2015 and Art Brussels 2015. The one is intentionally, indeed, strategically marginal and visually modest in the deployment of its means and objectives, the other is ostentatiously proud of its capacity to generate a mesmerizing, synthetic, centripetal, cultural and economic force of attraction within a local, national and international *art scene*. One is presented as an experiment, the other as a spectacle.

POPPOSITIONS 2015 is located in an abandoned postal building, while Art Brussels is deployed within two enormous exhibition halls (1 & 3) at Brussels Expo, Place de Belgique. One building is cold, damp, and unheated, the other is warmed by the movement and body heat of hundreds of 'flâneurs' perambulating along the length of its gallery-lined avenues. Irony is inflected in different, complementary, ways according to how one is positioned in regard to these two distinct events, sites, and their civic and national histories. The old post office, peppered with traces of previous activity, is a temporary home to a group of artists, and during POPPOSITIONS 2015 to a group of alternative galleries and publishing ventures. Art Brussels is grandiose, well-staged and choreographed according to the dictates of its underlying entertainment based economic model. The contrast creates a sharply focused picture of the art world's economically defined class system and its relationship to affluence, power, and influence; where a host of decentralized practical and theoretical initiatives orbit around major, cyclical, socio-economic events in eccentric trajectories.

As these two conflicting art fair models reveal, their differences are structural in an economic and also in a political sense. On the one hand, a basic distinction is articulated through the adoption of distinct economic models. Art Brussels is openly pragmatic and capitalist, while POPPOSITIONS is idealist in the sense of focussing, in the first place, on an alternative economy of ideas. Yet both events pivot on the circulation of goods and services. On the other hand, a more pervasive socio-political distinction is reproduced, in local form, in the juxtaposition of centre and periphery, rich and poor, the powerful and the marginal. In one location there is a celebration of capitalism's culturally mediated praxis in the ostentatious display of galleries and cultural goods, the carefully chosen signifiers of taste, desire and connoisseurship, where the art object is simply an expensive and highly refined substitute for any commodity. In the other location, the products of contingent strategies are displayed. But in this case, modes of presentation and cultural artifacts are linked to an ongoing search for new practices that might be created through an open-ended experimentation on the possibilities of alternative economies of art. An economy of goods versus an economy of ideas, a politics of transnational culture industries (a global network of art fairs) versus a politics of artisanal economies (locally rooted sites of cultural experimentation). The tensions of the post-1980s culture industry model and its alternatives are at rendezvous as one moves from one site to another.

However, the distinction between POPPOSITIONS 2015 and Art Brussels 2015 is not only based on alternative economic models, extravagant versus modest scales, since both are art fairs that promote the sale of artworks, which is the basic function of a contemporary art fair. Nor is it only based on different models of how to promote contact and exchange. It is also based on a distinction between discursive models and how these models are used to cultivate (or not)

alternative economies of ideas, knowledge and social action. This can be illustrated in the case of La Mirage's participation in POPPOSITIONS 2015.

'La Mirage' is the name of a fluid discursive field that has been set in motion, in 2014, by its founding members, Sophie Bélair Clément, Philippe Hamelin, and Vincent Bonin. While it does currently (May 2015) have a location, it is provisional in the sense that 'La Mirage' can take any form that its founders might choose to give it in order to address issues or challenges raised by an evolving art world conceived in its broadest sense. For POPPOSITIONS 2015, La Mirage presented, in its adopted form of an alternative project space located at 5445 de Gaspé in Montreal, a project, Lot 94, by the artist, writer, and anthropologist David Tomas.

Tomas approached La Mirage with the idea of presenting a critical, site specific work for POPPOSITIONS 2015, and La Mirage embarked on the project in the *role* of alternative 'gallery,' it being understood by its founders that this role was contingent and subject to different interpretations. It re-presented itself through Tomas' project by creating a specifically targeted discursive field of critical engagement with POPPOSITIONS 2015 that was jointly created by Tomas and its founding members. La Mirage's discursive field provided the conduit for Lot 94's acceptance and presentation at POPPOSITIONS 2015, according to the latter's adopted theme, which for this year, was symbolized by Robert Filliou's dictum 'Whatever you think, think something else, whatever you do, do something else.'

In opposition to the political economy founded on criteria of productivity, the Fluxus artist and former economist Robert Filliou published his Principles of Poetic Economy in 1970, aiming at creating a new lifestyle (*art de vivre*). Starting from his position, POPPOSITIONS commits itself to valorise new experimental and ingenious economies amidst the prevailing art market.

Filliou's dictum had been used to frame the following statement of intent:

### **LET'S TURN ART FAIRS INTO ARTISTIC LABORATORIES**

While public authorities are ranking cultural production down in their priority list, the economic practice of the fair is being challenged. Can the art market be combined with cultural innovation? Conceived as an assembly of international galleries and hybrid art spaces, POPPOSITIONS is an experiment with the sale of contemporary art. Changing location within Brussels for each edition, POPPOSITIONS aims to occupy an independent, critical position during Art Brussels.

Thus POPPOSITIONS 2015 created and defined its 'alternative' discursive socio-economic and political field in an open, experimental, dialogical way within the parameters of its primary function of operating as a dynamically viable alternative to Art Brussels. The proposal to present Lot 94 at POPPOSITIONS 2015 was designed to probe the economic and political limits of the latter's discursive field. Its 'terms of engagement' were as follows :

David Tomas' Lot 94 is a precise intervention in the context of an experimental art fair that cultivates a deliberate ambiguity in relation to the question of the exhibition and its functions. The artist proposes to present this work in this experimental fair because of the

questions that it raises about the sale of this kind of critically oriented conceptual art work and how this sale can resonate with POPPOSITIONS 2015's theme. 'REALTY POSITION' is clearly a work that deals with the socio-geographical limits of what constitutes a property and its relationship to ownership and capital. These issues resonate with POPPOSITIONS' choice of an old post office building, its present ambiguous status and its proposed use to host POPPOSITIONS. Matta-Clark's work also highlights the unproductive residues of urban development and how these 'useless spaces' can be recycled into the art world as artworks (or as experimental art fairs in the case of POPPOSITIONS and a former post office building). Tomas' Lot 94 deals with the same economic logic of recycling, but in this case from the world of auction sales and catalogues back into the art world in the form of meta-visual works that are no longer engaged with the nature and status of the primary or secondary artwork information and/or aesthetics, but, in contrast, explore the nature and status of the meta-economic 'artwork' as a product of a strategic tactic of 'post-capitalist recycling.' ... In keeping with the economic logic of the system it explores, both in terms of the socio-economic function of the auction, the economic underpinning of Matta-Clark's 'REALTY POSITION,' and the basic function of an art fair, Lot 94 is for sale in its different formats as an edition.

Because the primary medium for participation in POPPOSITIONS 2015 was an alternative gallery or project space, La Mirage was represented in its current form of 'an independent project space located in a storage unit at 5445 de Gaspé in Montreal, Quebec, Canada,' a discursive site that was identified by the number E6-03. The interface between POPPOSITIONS 2015's discursive field and La Mirage's was provided by a short paragraph in the application:

La Mirage poses the fundamental questions of where and how to display visual projects in a meaningful way within a specific subculture (the art world). It envelops a spectator (or viewer) in a modest, yet unique, architectural experience that raises the question of where they are, how long they might stay, and where this particular exhibition site is situated in relation to the art world around it.

Room 10, La Mirage's allotted space in POPPOSITIONS 2015, coincidentally duplicated E6-03's basic rectangular shape and its approximate size. This alignment concretized the interface between alternative art fair and project space, their discursive fields, and set the stage for the presentation of Lot 94 and the deployment of its propositions concerning the auction of radical works of art, the question of the relationship between property, ownership, and capital in the art world; the status and recyclability of 'derelict' or 'unproductive' urban spaces in the context of another, parallel, economic system of auction sales; and, finally, the political, economic and aesthetic functions of the 'meta-economic 'artwork'' conceived according to a logic and strategy of 'post-capitalist recycling.' At certain moments, Philippe Hamelin, Sophie Bélair Clément and David Tomas *performed as if* they might be in the position of a gallerist in order to mediate between the public and Lot 94 (a posture that might be interpreted, in hindsight, as resonating with Filliou's dictum in the context of POPPOSITIONS 2015).

Given the issues raised and addressed by POPPOSITIONS 2015, La Mirage's adopted mandate, and the politics and economics of Lot 94, it is clear that the conjunction of interests, tactics and strategies (as the proposed answers to the different, yet resonant, sets of questions raised by each

of the actors in POPPOSITIONS 2015 reaffirms) was radically different from those that operated in the case of Art Brussels. It is hard to imagine POPPOSITIONS 2015's creative layering of issues, and the exploration of their implications through the choice of participants, in the case of Art Brussels, even though the basic frame of reference (an art fair) is the same in both cases. It is through an exploration of the distinctions between the two types of art fair and their viewpoints on the politics, economics, and commodity status of artworks, that one is confronted with a clear political choice between an economy and politics of ideas and an economy and politics of rare cultural goods. Moreover, it is in terms of this ability to choose and its roots in a *politicized* avant-garde history of art, that Filliou's dictum, 'Whatever you think, think something else, whatever you do, do something else' makes perfect contemporary sense as a point of departure for the exploration of a variety of socio-political possibilities and their different visual manifestations.

**Annex  
Maquettes for Lot 94**



