

URBAN SPACES, EVERYDAY LIFE AND THE EYE OF HISTORY

AN INTERVIEW WITH KATRINA SARK

Katrina Sark is a PhD candidate in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at McGill University, specializing in cultural analysis and urban cultures. She has co-authored *Berliner Chic: A Locational History of Berlin Fashion* (with Susan Ingram) and assisted with the research for *Wiener Chic*. Her photographs have been printed in *Inquire: Journal of Comparative Literature* (2010), *Berliner Chic* (2011), *World Film Locations: Berlin* (2012), and can be seen on her blog: <http://suitesculturelles.wordpress.com/>. She lives in Montreal.

Martin Parrot is a documentary filmmaker, a PhD student in Humanities at York University, and blogger/cultural critic at monlimoilou.com.

I interviewed scholar-artist Katrina Sark at the Arts Café in Montréal on November 28th, 2012. We talked of Montréal and its psychogeography, of photography, familiar spaces, life in exile and everyday life.

Martin Parrot: As an artist as well as a scholar, if there are any, how do you see the relations between your work as a cultural analyst and your work as a photographer? More specifically, is the work you do on one side informing the way you produce material on the other?

Katrina Sark: Actually, this is new to me; it is usually the opposite. Normally, I am the one in your chair, I am the one interviewing designers, filmmakers, authors, looking at cultural production in fashion, film, photography, art, architecture, etc. As a scholar, these are puzzles I work with; I analyze them carefully, mapping out continuities, discontinuities and trends, and relate these to the culture of a city, especially, in my case: Berlin or Vienna. It is a little bit of detective work, a little bit of analytical work, but also, always, fun interpretative work. Being on the other side of that, being called an artist, is new to me.

MP: You speak of visual culture as a puzzle. Knowing that people will see your photography, is this idea (the puzzle) operative in your work as a photographer? Do you work expecting the gaze of an audience?

KS: With a camera in hand, I always approach things differently. When I take a photograph, I try to capture a landscape or cityscape, building, aspect of culture, etc., visually; I produce an image instead of a text or puzzle. My interpretative act is a particular image. That said: I am in both cases (as a photographer as well as a cultural analyst) pursuing a certain understanding of culture. In that sense, my two activities are related, but the labels

are different. As you can see, I am still negotiating the relationship between these two sides of my work.

MP: Working with images this way, you are not communicating as you are as a scholar, and not, one could argue, to the same audiences. You have two blogs, *Suites Culturelles* and *Les Carabinières*, where we can see snippets of your academic work, but also photo essays on Montréal cityscapes and various experimentations. Who is looking at these? How do they respond to your work?

KS: I think I have two distinct audiences for these blogs. *Les Carabinières* is a photo blog that is a fun hobby to do. I started it when I first got my camera. It was initially a way for me to do a photograph a day and build an archive of images to work from later on. In parallel to this experimentation, I started reading theories of photography and added short quotes from these books to the photos I posted every day. My dad had always been into photography, and he often talked about things like image composition, but I have never taken a photography course. That first year acted as one. The challenge was to apply theories, experimenting with them through images drawn from the material of my everyday life.

Following the 365-day project, I decided to do another yearly photography series. However, instead of working with quotes from theories of photography, I associated my pictures with other readings I was doing. I ended up working with quotes on happiness and mindfulness, trying to make these concepts into a daily

practice: not merely thinking about these things, but really practicing happiness. In my case, it was through photography. Another way to archive moments and ways I relate to the world.

MP: This leads us to everyday life. I mentioned this earlier when you came in: there are recurring patterns in your photography, “tropes” if you will, articulating what appears in the image. These I see as expressing everyday life. As you said yourself, the daily and the ordinary are the challenging material you had to make images from in your yearly series of photographs. It seems to me, however, that they also organize formal elements in some of your most recent photo essays on Montréal in *Suites Culturelles*--the expectation of repetition in movements and gestures, overlapping spaces of the familiar and anonymous, close-ups on the apparently usual, borders and grids, common place architecture, etc.

KS: Yes, I think so, but it is there by default, no? It is the parameter through which I did the series; the goal was to take a picture a day of what was happening daily, not to look for the extraordinary or the spectacular. It did not always work; I did not always succeed, for example, in associating an image of my daily life with a notion of happiness. The possibility, however, was always there, even when working in a limited 24-hour period for each image. It is interesting to me that what you see as being immanent to these series to me is a subconscious thing.

MP: From your perspective, as the photographer, what is the relation

between the daily series and the photo essay entitled *Borders and Everyday Life in Montréal*? Was the latter informed by material from the initial series? Do you approach photography in the same way?

KS: There are three photo essays featured in *Suites Culturelles*, each of them took me a few weeks to put together. Without the 24-hour limit, I can take more time for research, so to speak, and take more pictures! *Borders and Everyday Life in Montréal* is the most recent one, and it's the first one I did that was commissioned for this journal and forced me to work with a particular theme. The previous one was *Montréal's Ruins of Modernity*. I have always been fascinated by ruins and broken buildings, and the Montréal cityscape offers lots of these. The expression 'ruins of modernity' comes from an interview I did with a Viennese designer whose fashion label "Ruins of Modernity" I really admire, and which happens to be an idea I always associated with Montréal.

MP: Why Montréal? How is it related to ruins and to modernity?

KS: It seems to me that for a while in Montréal, especially since Expo 67, there was a craze to build-build-build on top of what was there before, always in a modernist style. Now, that time has passed and we are left with marks of the dreams of a modern city that are still standing, yet seem short-lived, in some cases on the verge of destruction. The Olympic Stadium is a great example. It seems frozen in time, and yet, affected by it, displaced. There are many other buildings like this, often older ones too. You do not

see this in the rest of Canada. Vancouver is brand new and polished. As in most cities that undergo gentrification, the old inner-city neighbourhoods with brick buildings and factories are now turned into condos and trendy boutiques and restaurants. You can see this happening in Montreal on lower Saint-Laurent Boulevard.

MP: How is this feeling of a building being frozen in time related to its immediate environment, especially thinking in terms of spatial and temporal borders operating in and through various neighbourhoods?

KS: It really depends on the site, but in the city core, where gentrification is always happening with the building of new spaces, Montréal is generally very similar to other big cities: newness ought to pervade everywhere. When this happens, ruins are taken over. Depending on where you are in the city, or how far you are from the city core, and, of course, on the financial situation of the city, gentrification happens, or is about to happen. Montréal is still in a bubble, gentrification is not happening at the same rate as in other cities... Economically, what it means is simple: gentrification has yet to happen; these buildings are not protected or preserved, they are simply left out, at least for now.

MP: Would you say they are remains of the city?

KS: Yes, and it is why it is such an interesting paradox: some of them are still functional, yet they are ambiguous—they have a multi-layered and disorganized relation to space and time. From a

modernist perspective, they are outmoded and have yet to be updated. I like that temporal paradox.

MP: Looking at other photographs in the essay, how are pictures of the shores of the Saint-Lawrence River, of the Old Port, and of city parks related to everyday life, borders and the temporal paradox you highlighted?

KS: When thinking about the theme “Borders and Everyday Life,” I found it challenging to portray the borders in a city like Montréal. I asked friends who live in different neighbourhoods for suggestions and interestingly their answers all overlapped and confirmed my own: Boulevard Saint Laurent, Saint Lawrence River, etc. By comparison, in a city like Berlin, it is much easier to locate the traces of divisions: the borders are still there, and much more visible. In Berlin you can see the borders between districts, neighbourhoods, ethnic communities, even historical periods, etc., while I feel like in Montréal the divisions were less visible and more conceptual and linguistic. Not surprisingly, Boulevard Saint-Laurent comes to mind as an important border in Montréal. Historically, it used to be the border between East and West, francophones and anglophones. Even if this is no longer operative, so to speak, everyone still remembers it that way. So when I tried to capture the legacy of that street, I do not think I did it justice. Even now, I do not know how I would do it! Nevertheless, I took a picture of a double border, I believe, the corner of Laurier and Saint-Laurent, which is the border between two

neighbourhoods: the Mile-End and the Plateau Mont-Royal.

Water is also important. Montréal is an island, and it has natural water borders. There are also railways, lots of them! In the Mile-End and Parc-Extension they create very real and uncomfortable borders. In the Mile-End, for example, there is a huge overpass. People used to take quick shortcuts through the railway to go from Saint-Denis to Saint-Laurent instead of having to go all the way to Saint-Urbain, and then come back eastward. A security guard now prevents people from crossing the railway; he sits there all day and gives tickets to trespassers. The railway, however, is much safer to cross than that crazy overpass, where cars are always speeding. So I started thinking about other borders, barriers, divisions, fences, etc. between neighbourhoods and various city spaces. I also took pictures of Avenue Hutchinson, which is supposed to be the border between Outremont and the Mile-End. Walking around, I was careful that my photographs did not overlap too much with other projects I did before (i.e. *Montréal's Ruins of Modernity* and *Tracing the Remains of Montréal's Expo 67*). If I previously focused on style and formal architectural elements, with *Borders and Everyday Life in Montréal* my focal point was spatial borders—smaller ones as well as bigger ones—in the city.

MP: Where is your work taking you now? You worked with borders in Montréal, with ruins of modernity, and with the Expo 67; what is next for you?

KS: The next photo essay project will be *A Room of One's Own*.

MP: As in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*?

KS: Yes, I recently re-read this essay and was surprised at how relevant it still is today. So I decided to take photographs of my colleagues' living rooms and working rooms, especially those spaces used for writing dissertations. I will focus on my female colleagues, so that it goes with Woolf's essay. These are spaces we spend much of our days in, and take for granted. I want to bring this to light. You know, there is often very real creativity in the ways these spaces are set up. I find this inspiring. To capture how a certain text or project is produced, in what space, by whom, to capture the physical conditions in which creativity is at work.

MP: We are going back to the archive you mentioned earlier, to recording daily, familiar objects, events, and activities. Do you see differences between archived images and archived texts?

KS: Yes. You do not have as much control over archived images. The camera always picks up unconscious elements in the image, things you were not necessarily looking for, things that surprise you. Sometimes you either have multiple meanings in an image, or you have details appearing on the foreground that you did not see while taking the picture. Sometimes they are unwanted, sometimes they emphasize what you were trying to accomplish with the image. The latter moments are amazing. In general, it is harder to control an image than a text. With language, you can work at and

control the minutiae of meaning; you can create clear nuances, etc., but I want to preserve the power of images, and so I do not use Photoshop or re-work images once they are taken. This approach to images sets up limitations as in the example of Boulevard Saint-Laurent, trying to capture the concept of a border that is no longer there. Living in Montréal, you know that this used to be a symbolic border, but there is nothing left of it. It's extremely challenging to produce an image to say exactly how this feels.

MP: You took pictures of Berlin, Toronto, Vancouver and Vienna. What is specific about Montréal? How is the cityscape here reacting to your work? Is it different?

KS: In comparison to Berlin, Montréal's borders are often are intangible. I mentioned Hutchinson. Well, this avenue looks like any other, and yet, it is a border. I cycled Hutchinson from south to north, and honestly you cannot tell that the Mile-End ends there, or that Outremont begins. That, in itself, is interesting. Whereas in a place like Berlin, you really have a sense of the city having been torn; after twenty years, there are still very clear markers of division. Of course, Berlin and Montréal do not have the same history; it depends on what went on in the city.

MP: Walking around or cycling in pursuit of markers of division in Montréal, has it affected how you take pictures, or how you see your work?

KS: I like the fact that pictures can be failures and successes. I like that you cannot take the camera to the street knowing that you will succeed in capturing this or that. I like surprises in

the images; they are like moments of epiphany. These unseen details upon the capture of an image, the ones you see later on, they teach you how to look at things with more empathy, they train you. This being said, you cannot plan such moments. Some people approach images with concepts in mind, and so modify them in the post-production to suit their projects. This does not interest me as I am doing photography based on capturing real moments and essays. I like forcing my gaze to look at things differently, especially for famous buildings, like the Five Roses Flour Mill, which is such an iconic Montreal sight. In such cases I use a 35mm lens because it forces me to look for details instead of relying on the usual cityscape we are used to. My first photo project was done with a 50mm lens, which is even more limiting. It trained me to think about how you can communicate, or suggest, the idea of a whole image through fragments. If you know Montréal, you do not need to see the whole flour mill to recognize it; your mind can complete the picture, and in so doing, create something known that is also new.

MP: When you mentioned Saint-Laurent and Hutchinson, or the Flour Mill, or talked about waiting for something to happen, for the intangible to be captured, it seems to me that you are trying to capture something very specific, almost the experience of a situation. How do you expect people to react to these images? For whom are these documents produced?

KS: Well, honestly, I do not know. However, given the feedback I got from

earlier work, I feel like moments of recognition from the audience means I have been successful in some ways. For example, I took pictures of the roof of Frank Gehry's EMP Museum in Seattle, especially as it reflects sunlight in very specific ways. Some people related to this picture—they knew the place and felt an instant connection with it through the photograph. When you can almost see a smile on someone's face, you know that there is a moment of recognition. It also means "I understand your language, and what you are trying to say." I love this. I see it as similar to poetry.

MP: Nicely said. Thank you very much for this interview, and for making me revisit Montréal again for the first time.

KS: You're welcome!

For Katrina Sark's photo essays, please visit: <http://suitesculturelles.wordpress.com/photography/photo-essays/>

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