

## **Shelley Ouellet (and a cast of thousands)** **By Leslie Dawn**

Aviary at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Lethbridge, AB

Wasn't it the great American abstract expressionist painter Barnett Newman who said, "Aesthetics is to artists as ornithology is to birds?"

In the present context, Barney's pronouncement recalls an event from when I was a young boy.

I lived for a time in a small community in Saskatchewan called Punnichy which, I was told, translates into English from the local native word as "little bird with no feathers". This proper, yet humorous, name was apparently used to identify a pioneer priest whose bald, egg-shaped head with its fringe of hair looked like a newly hatched chick. The irony in this re-naming or (mis)representation was probably designed by his indigenous audience to undercut the authority which the missionary undoubtedly presumed in ceaselessly chirping out "the Word" to the unconverted. In any case, and only slightly beside the point, while resident in Punnichy/Little Bird, I entered a contest for building bird houses at the summer fair, the annual local "spectacle" which brought the community together. Being of a childlike and pedantic frame of mind (like the priest in question?), I wanted what I now recognize as the quintessential construction, the paragon of birdhouses, something absolutely, transcendently conventional. I'm not sure how I formulated this idea, but I was certain I knew how it looked. Helpless as I was then as now in the face of wood and tools, my father actually cut the wood and did the basic construction, and in one of those rare instances of harmony between us, made an object that looked like what I had in mind. I simply nailed on the roof, painted it blue and white (hoping to attract a pair of bluebirds), and submitted it under my name. Not surprisingly, given conventional ideas of originality, there was some objection to this joint authorship. While this didn't bother me, what did were the other entries with which it was judged. Pushing through the crowd to find the display, I discovered that the pieces occurred in all manner of shapes and materials, many of which in no way corresponded to my critical *idee fixe*. One in particular I found especially problematic. It was simple enough: its rectangular structure with a pitched roof, two gables, and a hole at one end approached my conception. But what troubled me was its material. It was made of plastic red interlocking building blocks that mimicked bricks, with a cardboard roof printed green to look like shingles. It had no floor, and its stepped diagonals appeared "unfinished". This object, I thought, had little practical or theoretical relationship to my singular notion. And yet, I think now, having seen Shelley Ouellet's *Aviary*, the challenge presented by this brick birdhouse may have been precisely to the point.

Indeed, Shelley Ouellet's installation renames and transforms the upstairs gallery in the old brick wing of the Southern Alberta Art Gallery (originally a library) into a piece called *Aviary*, that is, a large caged birdhouse for a flock of birds, usually of

different, and perhaps exotic, types. In so doing she demolishes not only accepted notions of what a birdhouse is and how it is thought of, represented and constructed, but also challenges the foundational ideas of the single author (as author-ity) and the unique work of art. In addition, she uses irony, as well as unconventional means and materials to impose several layers of mimesis on this structure. Bricks are again mimicked and transformed, although this time into the names and identities of participants in the show which literally form the building blocks of the work. It is their lives, experiences and expressions, particularly their role in spectacular, communal events, which are collectively incorporated in the work, bringing art and life together in a manner that may excuse my earlier ramble along memory lane.

Ouellet's interest in collectively and audience participation within the production of a work of art goes back to an early experience she had at the Calgary Olympics in 1988. While attending the opening ceremonies, a super-spectacular event, and sitting with tens of thousands of others in a stadium, she and those around her were asked to don coloured ponchos and become part of huge patterns which they couldn't actually see, but were meant for other eyes, much distant. The passivity usually rehearsed by the spectacular audience here became a simulation of participation. But there was a price to this inclusion. The appearance of active participation actually entailed a double loss of identity, surrendered first in the massed crowd, and then again, "masked" under the poncho, in which each person concealed their individual identity and became a simple dot of pure colour in a gigantic grid, like a pixel on a computer screen, or a dot on a television screen, its ultimate purpose.

Ego-loss, however, doesn't appear threatening in this context and has a certain ecstatic appeal, an almost transcendent dissolution of the self into a hyper-reality that was being endlessly replicated and disseminated around the globe to yet another, even more passive television audience of tens of millions. Such global events must lie on the horizons of the spectacle where reality surpasses itself, a position that accounts for our continuing fascination despite our growing boredom with them. These sites of electronic, mediated non-differentiation, where names cease to have meaning, certainly stake out one of the extreme borders of the discourse of the individual in contemporary society. The relationships within this limit experience have formed the basis for a series of works, of which *Aviary* is the latest.

Here Ouellet chose birds as her metaphor and Lethbridge and the upstairs gallery at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery as her site. (Intriguingly, her previous work *Entomology*, a gigantic bug made up smaller plastic bugs, could be of primal interest to her birds. One wonders if the issues begun there were "swallowed up" (pun intended) in *Aviary*.) Again the audience would make the artwork, but she extended the idea advanced in *Entomology* further. Her forms of participation within *Aviary* both dissolved and reinforced the identity of those involved in the production of the work, a condition not usual to the spectacle, and in fact a critique of it. To engage her

potential audience/participants, Ouellet had literally thousands of forms distributed on which anyone was asked to inscribe a representation of any kind of a bird. "Draw a bird", it said. The only limits seem to have been the size of the page. The results surpassed expectations. In fact, they were overwhelming. Significantly, the distribution of forms by gallery volunteers in an arena at a local sports event yielded the greatest number of responses. The number of entries was so large that it became logistically impossible to carry out the original plan of scanning them into a computer, reducing them in size, printing them, placing them in a grid according to their tonal register, and composing the image of gigantic bird from the total. But a viable alternative plan emerged.

Instead of the image of a bird, Ouellet substituted that of metaphoric birdhouse, an Aviary, in fact, the gallery itself. A photograph of the outside end wall of the building, shot from the park in which it sits, became the image/scaffolding for the work. For those not familiar with the institution, it is simple rectangular structure of brick with arched windows high on its end walls (like an opening to a birdhouse) with a gabled roofline (very much the image of the brick birdhouse mentioned earlier). The photograph was digitized and reduced to a fairly coarse tonal grid in which the initial image began to fade and dissolve as details disappeared and contours blurred and became regularized into rectangular units. Each small rectangle of the overall screen appeared like a brick echoing those in the wall of the gallery represented within the image. Now, as said earlier, bricks, either real or simulated, are unusual materials for a birdhouse, but there they were part of a special construction. Each was unique in its place and yet identical in its size and form. Each had its own identity, and yet was functionally part of a greater totality. Thus the image of dissolution into a mass and the uniqueness of the individual unit was doubled.

The digitized and gridded image was enlarged, although not to life size, and printed on six panels, which were then hung parallel to, but away from the inside end wall of the gallery of which they showed the reverse. The panels stepped up towards the centre, echoing the pitched roof within and without the space. The actual high window emerged just above its representation on the printed screen. The panels thus doubled the structure, showing the outside against the inside. Object and its representation tended to merge in the uncanny doubling, just as the viewer was (dis)placed into two positions. Rather than constructing the image of a bird from bird images, Ouellet ended by making a birdhouse or Aviary out of the gallery. The flock, however, like the image, was also doubled.

It occurs at both ends of the gallery. Closer examination of the panels reveals that each rectangle in the grid making up the tonal field of the print contains the name of one of the participants who had contributed a representation of a bird. Just as the relationship between single bird and flock can stand for that between individual and mass audience, so the image became a field on which names both occur and dissolve, depending on where one stands and what one is looking for. In any case, dissolution turns into differentiation and back again in both photographic images and in printed proper names. The names are printed in regular typeface, rather than

appearing as signatures that mark the sign of the individual. They are thus both identical and identifiable and distinct.

The trace of the individual disappears into the construction of the collective during the staging of the social, just as individual bricks become a wall or single birds make up a flock. But unlike the spectacle, which is thion within Aviary both dissolved and reinforced the identity of those involved in the production of the work, a condition not usual to the spectacle, and in fact a critique of it. To engage her potential audience/participants, Ouellet had literally thousands of forms distributed on which anyone was asked to inscribe a representation of any kind of a bird. "Draw a bird", it said. The only limits seem to have been the size of the page. The results surpassed expectations. In fact, they were over a full range of options prescribed only by their imaginations and the conventions of drawing. Although she and the gallery both staged and orchestrated the event, the participants were allowed the broadest possible scope of representation and recognition. Their names appear as an integral part of the piece, even if the artist's name was attached to it. While reproducing the conditions of production of the spectacular, the piece is able to undercut its major component of passivity and anonymity, while preserving the sense of community.

What then of the second flock, that is the collection of drawings which were not used as the basis of the image? The history of the gallery building itself, having been originally a book library, supplied the answer. The individual drawings sit at the other end of the gallery, bound into a series of black binders that rest on an arcing table. Here again, the individual books, with their single row of white labels, dissolve into a collective whole: a flock of black books. But upon opening up the binders, any semblance of unity rapidly disappears. The drawings are both of a bewildering array and yet of remarkable conventionality. This multiplicity of birds defies classification, yet remains within the bounds of the recognizable. It invites classification and yet denies its enclosure. Childlike drawings by those just grasping (or being grasped by) the means of representation contrast with sophisticated renderings by those who have mastered them. But there are also stick-like birds, and fat egg-shaped birds, aggressive raptors and adorable chicks, simplified cartoon images and highly detailed renderings. There are birds seen frontally and in profile, flying and sitting, as well as abstract, realistic, linear, painterly, flat, modeled, colourful, black and white. Although there were no "little birds with no feathers", a complex discursive field of bird imagery emerges. But not all the images fit within the conventional ideas of drawing. There were also somewhat transgressive images, like Xerox's of hands giving the "bird", printed dictionary definitions of birds, and so on. Both the absolutely conventional and the edges of the possible were explored by this collective audience.

Indeed, it appears that there are more possibilities for the representation of birds than there are bird types. How then to contain this field of representation and produce a taxonomy or organization? This question again appears to have been answered by the library setting that implied a systematic organization of knowledge and the previous piece, Entomology, which implied an Ornithology. Aviary makes

reference to both the history of the building and its own antecedents with a card catalogue in which the names of the contributors are all cross indexed to the volume in which their drawings are sited. These cards are found organized alphabetically on library card drawers stacked nearby. But while this system has the appearance of "containing" and "ordering" all possible variations, again an internal investigation makes it evident how provisional and incomplete it is, and how it never sufficiently encloses its field.

These birds, or representations of birds, and this Aviary hover at the edges of the discursive field of both the spectacle and the individual, the conventional and the representational, in an arena where the limits of these issues may actually be mapped out. What perhaps seems missing is, however, the noise of an aviary. Caged birds seem to sing incessantly, and one of the metaphoric similarities linking birds and humans is that they not only live in houses, and form collectives, they also have voices and music. In Aviary, silence reigns. But perhaps one just has to listen closely enough, because here the audience is given a voice, that although muted, is both collective and yet individual, and is diversified in a way that the dissolving and deafening yet inarticulate roar of the crowd of the spectacle can never be.

Leslie Dawn