

NADINE NORMAN

Je suis
disponible

dynamique, fiable,
généreuse, sensuelle,
cherche une fusion
entre la fiction et la
réalité avec quelq'un
qui partage les mêmes
désirs.

MUSÉE D'ART CONTEMPORAIN DE MONTRÉAL
Québec ::

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I'M AVAILABLE.
AND YOU?
Sandra Grant Marchand

In the vein of the multifarious modes of artistic intervention, the inter-media and performance-based projects of Nadine Norman disrupt the conventional relationship between art and viewer.¹ At once intervention relating to the social context, and artistic experience² eliciting exchanges, Norman's works introduce into this given world³ a critical and aesthetic dimension one could describe, metaphorically, as a reflection of social space: the appropriation of real space, infiltrated by the expression of fantasies and transmuted by the presence of the other; the simulation of Darlings or Call Girls or the ideal woman, mythicized between the real and the virtual; or the baring of interpersonal communication, of its codes and conditionings, in the call for the active participation of the public. Above all, it is the interrelation between artist and viewer in the expression of exchanges and social ties which can be seen through the prism of artistic intervention: Such is the project pursued by Nadine Norman, whose critical discourse operates obliquely, reduces its effects, its apriorisms, its intentions of asserting, in order to rehabilitate the possibility of shared words, mutual actions and common silences.

Through participatory relations between the public and this art form constructed in symbiosis with reality – in its social, contemporary or historical dimensions – Norman's approach thus suspends

the contemplative relationship with the art work and occupies various fields of intervention that further open up artistic practice to addressing topical issues with regard to the sociocultural context, communication codes and the realms of private and public. The questions concerning the roles and functions assigned to women that are insistently raised by Norman's work, with the risk inherent in the different strategies adopted, are echoed in the so-called public space – the space of the viewer, who not only takes part in the work, becoming fully engaged in it, body and word, but also, and essentially, makes it possible as an evolving structure.⁴ Together, the artist and the public experience, in real time, scenarios that are both plausible and illusory, fluctuating between the real and the fictional, and developing the work's meaning in the context of the sometimes disturbing exchanges they set in motion. The work becomes a crucible for the perceptions that shape female identities, and plays on this ambiguity within the interactive process.

For the most part, Norman's works, of which I'm available. And you? centres on similar themes, present situations where the play of representation, focused on the image of women, encourages the exploration of the links formed between desire and communication. In 1997, Darlings' – Indirect Labour and Idle Time touched on this dichotomy, blurring the image of the prostitute caught in the idle game of availability, and restoring to her, in a series of performances in the disused spaces of an old foundry – the exclusive domain of male labour – the imaginary power of her desires. In 1999, this time through an on-line survey, DIY Woman (short for Do-it-yourself woman) enabled the public to construct their own image of the ideal contemporary woman, a fragmented view of female identity that was then personified by actresses in different public actions. Call Girl 01 44 43 21 65, also from 1999, set in a fictitious agency of call girls and housed in a cultural centre, offered the chance of an encounter – 100% dialogue – between a deluxe "escort" and the visitor, a relational activity⁵ indeed, by penetrating and deconstructing the exchange strategies of the sex industry while maintaining the ambiguities contained within the expectations and seductive power of each individual (male or female). Je suis disponible (01) – Lyon, 2001, parodied the tactics employed in the personal ads to broach, in a more explicit way, the equivocal meaning of "availability" in the convivial envi-

ronment of singles clubs. Availability: a response to the desires of the other or an unutterable search for a presence?

With her new multidisciplinary and performance-based project *I'm available. And you?* presented at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, Norman examines more closely the concept of availability from the perspective of the social issues it underlies. In many ways exemplary of the feminist concerns inherent in the artist's practice, this work brings about a further semantic shift in the term "availability," from its definition as a corollary of a fabricated female identity, as a result of the standardization of expectations, towards an "availability" that is part of the social system, which it constitutes, and is free of the limitations that are necessarily assigned to it. This shift, which we apprehend in experiencing the work, follows its own trajectory, however, and like the earlier works which combine intervention strategies and representational devices (the "surveying of reality"⁷ contrasting with the play of verisimilitude), *I'm available. And you?* revolves around two overlapping axes that determine the process of its production.

At the outset, a series of advertising posters distributed throughout the city and relayed over an interactive website, "www.iamavailableandyou.com" – in which the artist appears as an "available woman" according to seven closely related themes (love, sex, family, work, complicity, solitude and fantasy) – invite the public to take part in a private session with the "available" woman artist. After an on-line consultation, like that conducted by an agency, and a selection, by focus groups, of the applicants worthy of meeting the artist, live one-on-one encounters take place within the installation in the Musée's Banque Laurentienne Gallery.⁸ This installation constitutes the second axis in the work's developmental process: The presentation of photographic and videographic elements, in the style of advertising images and movie trailers, some excerpts of which are incorporated into the interactive site and were disseminated before the launch of the exhibition, defines a multidisciplinary media space completed by the possibility of navigating on the site "www.iamavailableandyou.com". The simulation of a private environment, reproducing the comfort of a domestic interior and conducive to exchanges and the expression of subjectivity, also provides the scene for the successive encounters between the artist and

the applicants selected during the project. In the museum context, Norman emphasizes the disparity of tones – promotional, personal, institutional – and codes, which the visitor readily interprets in their interrelation in the gallery. Where the "available" figure is represented in the familiar guise of a consumer product, the *I'm available* conveys immediacy through the image of a versatile woman performing multiple, banal, comforting roles, a paradigm set out, somewhat mockingly, by the artist's various personae. Elsewhere, short video clips condense the shots, which refine the stereotyped images and soundtracks, in the efficient manner of film ads: Once again, the "available" woman thwarts expectations – there is no product marketed – offering instead her own availability, reduced to an advertising slogan, and soliciting that of the public, ironically urged to join in the game of consumption – and you?

It is here that the installation *I'm available. And you?* takes shape, in what Paul Ardenne would describe as "the participation that identifies eye and viewer," the "gaze," "attention" or initial "contribution."⁹ Meeting the expectation (and you?) or not, being confronted with one's own availability (or non availability) or not, thinking of ways to offer one's availability or not, these are all questions that call for a communicational interpretation from viewers with respect to their own conditioning. The mirror held out by the images of the "available" woman is certainly not unfamiliar to them: A reflection of their own availability, these images represent them, like an advertisement that crystallizes what they have become. But aren't we all engulfed in this role playing (male and female) that entangles our different states of being, or what Michel Maffesoli referred to as "successive sincerities" in describing "something more aleatory and more uncertain... more ludic, even more oneiric" that revolves around "the global imaginary of the community."¹⁰ Indeed, we are far from the interplay of determinisms, of individualities confined for too long in irreversible roles. Paradoxically, however, the advertising image, deconstructed under Nadine Norman's incisive eye, at once dispels and recalls the paradigms that need to be examined anew: the "availability" is that of a woman; it goes by the name of love, sex, family, work, complicity, solitude or fantasy, while it reaches out to the public, playing their own roles, just as intertwined and manifold. Beyond the fragmentary identities, it is the links indicated by the instances of *I'm avail-*

able. And you?, it is the possibilities for exchanges formulated casually, even whimsically, by these borrowed characters that make the process of transforming perceptions so engaging.

In the comfort of a media environment – in the twofold ambiguity of the exhibition presentation, the private and public spheres have become interchangeable – Norman unmask the offer of her availability, and at the same time creates the conditions for receiving the availability of the other. The strategy of interpersonal communication infiltrates that of the ready-to-think, it echoes a virtual (possible) exchange: I'm available, that is, open to the other, not yet present for the other. In this sense, only the encounter with the other can give meaning to the proposal, and only the availability of the possible publics can give meaning to the situation.¹¹

What is there in this desire for an encounter to fulfil expectations, however diffuse they may be? What is there in this opportunity for sharing, if not the osmosis of affects, ideas, desires, presences, the urgency of our verbal and non verbal communication – the relationship with the other that shapes the social system, which is now ours, and yours?

Sandra Grant Marchand

See Paul Ardenne's remarks on "participational" aesthetics, which "entered artistic practices in the 1960s." Translated from Paul Ardenne, *L'Image Corps – Figures de l'humain dans l'art du XXe siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Regard, 2001), p. 368-372.

See Paul Ardenne's definition: "it is artistic experience – the gesture of introspection, of punctual questioning, of encounter taking precedence over form – that will stick with us." Paul Ardenne, "Experimenting with the real: Art and reality at the end of the twentieth century," Paul Ardenne, Pascal Beausse and Laurent Goumarre, *Contemporary Practices: Art as Experience* (Paris: Éditions Dis Voir, 1999), p. 14. See also Paul Ardenne, *Un art contextuel – Création artistique en milieu urbain, en situation, d'intervention, de participation*, Chapter II, "L'expérience comme règle artistique" (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), p. 39-63.

Ibid., p 14.

Laurent Goumarre develops the idea of the "deceptual" strategy of contemporary practices that engage the viewer in the productive dynamic of the work to come." Laurent Goumarre, "Deceptual art: Contemporary art as coproduction," *Contemporary Practices*, p. 95-122.

5- On the subject of relational practices of the 1990s, see Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Presses du Réel, 2002). We are also using the expression in the sense of "the concrete experience of standing in a relationship to others, a relationship maintained by communication – that is, a philosophy conceived from a directly relational point of view." Francis Jacques, *Difference and Subjectivity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. xxv. Quoted in Michel Maffesoli, *The Contemplation of the World – Figures of Community Style* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 61.

I'm available. And you? explores a series of social and aesthetic situations and proposals incorporated into an installation in the Banque Laurentienne Gallery. The project includes advertisements, an interactive website, photographs and videos, and offers possibilities for meetings and exchanges in the installation gallery. A performance event in the form of a reality "talk show" is also part of the project.

Paul Ardenne uses the expression "arpentage de la réalité" in *L'Image Corps*, p. 307.

"www.iamavailableandyou.com" announces that all those who wish to meet the woman shown in the advertisements may apply by submitting a photo along with a written request. A specialized marketing firm, with the support of socially diverse focus groups, evaluates the applications and selects candidates throughout the exhibition. The one-on-one encounters take place regularly on Wednesday evenings in the installation gallery, which is open to the public, and are broadcast live. These encounters constitute performances in the form of a "talk show."

Translated from Paul Ardenne, *L'Art dans son moment politique – Écrits de circonstance* (Brussels: Éditions La Lettre volée, 1999), p. 14.

10- Michel Maffesoli, *Contemplation of the World*, p. 60.

11- "The contemporary taking place of art necessitates above all (and regardless of where the project is presented) that the work be produced as a context or circumstance, and even for it to take up residence in the lived time of a network of human relations... The art of the real now finds itself rooted in the situation rather than the site or, as Nicolas Bourriaud writes, it is passing from *in situ* to *in socius*." Patrice Loubier, "To Take Place, To Disappear: On Certain Shifts between Art and Reality," *Les Commensaux. Quand l'art se fait circonstances/When Art Becomes Circumstance*, ed. Patrice Loubier and Anne-Marie Ninacs (Montréal: Skol, 2001), p. 201.