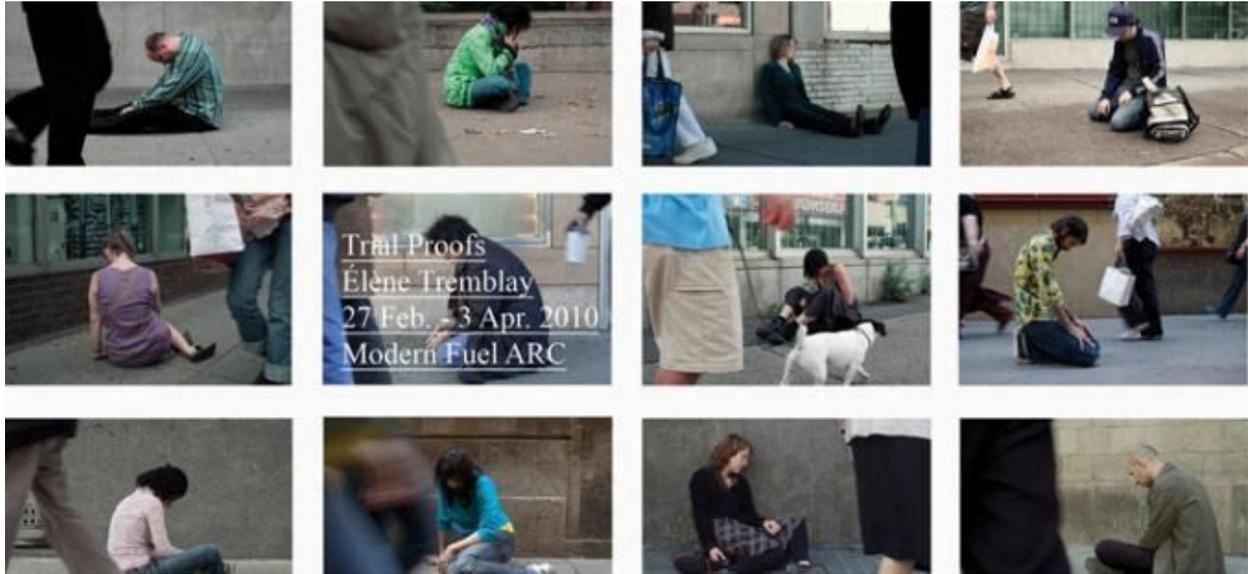


TRIAL PROOFS



Reception: Saturday 27 February 2010 at 7pm TRIAL PROOFS Élène Tremblay The exhibition *Trial Proofs* features a transfixing series of works including photography and video that the artist **Élène Tremblay** (Montreal, QC) has created to counter the slick, easily-consumed images of the perfect bodies in the mass media. As an alternative, Tremblay seeks postures and conditions that make the body pathetic in order to give it emotional resonance. Abject and isolated, the figures in her work appear in the abeyance of a trial. The situations depicted in her photographs are amplified and intensified by the manipulation of time in her video loops. The brevity and repetition of her videos recall the techniques used in film studies and in ethnography to analyze imagery and human behavior.

This exhibition creates an analytical time and space, making it possible to grasp the many facets of the social fact shown and, through fiction, to explore perceptions of the self and others in a social context. There is a subtle theatricality to these images, in their strategies of altering the pace of perception and the duration of observation, and in their highlighting of the constructed nature of the experience of the work. *Trial Proofs* will feature photographs taken in Kingston that contribute to Tremblay's ongoing photographic series *Les assis / The Sitters*. The individuals portrayed in the series appear to have dropped out of the ongoing rush of everyday life. The position Tremblay assigns to the viewers of these images is intended to reflect certain aspects of modern sensibilities: "passivity, paralysis, powerlessness, voyeurism, distraction, etc."

Images of the exhibition can be found [here](#)

Élène Tremblay lives and works in the Montreal area. Her work is based on photography and video and is regularly shown in Canada and abroad. Her works are held in public and private collections. She is an instructor at several universities in Quebec, holds a master's degree in visual arts from Concordia University and a PhD in artistic studies and practices at UQAM. She also directed the VOX gallery in Montreal from 1998 to 2002 and has been the curator of exhibits of contemporary photography, Web art and media arts. Image: Élène Tremblay, from *The Sitters*, inkjet prints (2007-2010).

Exhibition Essay

“There but for the grace of God, go I” is a phrase that I often recall, ever since I first encountered it in the funny pages when I was a child. It entails both the recognition and the relief you feel when you see someone else in an unfortunate situation that you yourself have narrowly avoided by chance or more favorable circumstance. The photographs and videos of Élène Tremblay in the exhibition “Trial Proofs” might elicit a similar response. The conditions staged in the depicted scenarios, and the postures for the people trapped in them, make the human body appear pathetic. Tremblay’s stated goal is to give the images an emotional resonance. These pictures of abject figures without shelter in the public space of the city should not be confused with street or documentary photography. They are deliberately staged, featuring models or actors, or very often the artist herself. A heightened sense of theatricality is particularly evident in the videos that render the charge of the figures’ immobility: a tension that arises from their inability or refusal to be in synch. By exaggerating the duration of motionlessness in her work, Tremblay hopes to provoke questions regarding the possibility of empathy with a simulacrum. In the slight difference between empathy and sympathy, or in the distorted image of an opposite, less fortunate, but shared fate that appears as in a looking glass, the process of identification is split by a thin tain that can sting like a razor.

In an ongoing series of photographs entitled *The Sitters* (2007-2010), Tremblay presents images of people who for some reason appear to have dropped out of the hustle and bustle of the street, dissociated from the passersby who rush on. Alone and prone on the pavements of Barcelona, Montreal and Kingston, these people could be indigent, penitent, intransigent, or simply spent. Tremblay has stated that these images are meant to evoke in viewers certain aspects of the experience of modernity like passivity, paralysis and powerlessness. The immobility of the figures in the photographs is emphasized even further by the stationary souls displayed in the videos *Misfortunes #1* and *Misfortunes #2* (2005), or in the short Sisyphian circuit of the animation (2010) generated from the still image of *The Falling Man* (2005), who barely rises to fall.

The discomfiting characters of Tremblay’s work could be described as inhabiting or enduring the limbo state of purgatory, but for me they recall more precisely the state of a personage in Ante-Purgatory: Belacqua. In Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Belacqua, a Florentine lute-maker famed for his indolence, is condemned to wait out the span of his lifetime before he can, through the grace of God, enter Purgatory proper and begin his ascent to Paradise. In the shade of a rock at the foot of Mount Purgatory we find Belacqua in his pose, sitting on the ground and barely able to raise his head from between his knees.

The title of the exhibition, “Trial Proofs,” is meant to suggest that like an unlimited number of trial proofs can be run off before a definitive print, and unlike Belacqua whose wait at some point will end, the characters in Tremblay’s work are unable to transcend or unwilling to exit their position and therefore will be tested without resolution. Other works offer a slightly different albeit similar scenario.

The actor who poses as the mad woman in the video *Untitled* (2010) exhibits a rage that is evident but incomprehensible and unrelenting. The photo series *The Blue Blanket* (2010) shows the artist performing with the title object in the streets and on the platforms of Barcelona. Her body is vaguely discernible, disfigured by the folds of the cloth that covers her. Though the cloth in these images has attributes pertaining to its usefulness as shelter for those without, more prominently it serves as a visible prohibition. These works are not structured to show a deprivation that can be overcome; they make an impediment more impassable. As such, the reciprocation of the sympathy or empathy shared by viewers of these and the other images is rendered problematic. The voice of conscience is not echoed by the subjects on view; it goes unrecognized. Their stifling silence is more akin to the petrifying power of the Medusa, in front of whom one feels lucky to have a sheet, no matter how thin, before one’s eyes.

Giorgio Agamben, in the text “Notes on Gesture” (from *Means Without End*, 2000) which could be described as a very short history of gesture in photography, argues that the history of Western art could be summed up as an

eventual compliance to the silent invocation for the liberation of the image into gesture. For Agamben, gesturality points above all to the being-in-language of the human being, with language understood as being an immanent and not a transcendent element of human experience. Gesture is first and foremost a medium of communication, and what it communicates is communicability, thereby opening up the ethical and political dimension of the still and moving image as a means without an end. Agamben's scheme is disrupted somewhat by Tremblay's images, which tend more towards the pose than gesture. Tremblay counters the call to liberate gesture from images by immobilizing her figures and making the viewer pause. This is not to say that there is no relation between gesture and pose; pose too draws attention to its mediality. Unaccounted for in Agamben's short text on gesture, the dissembling capacity of language is clearly pronounced in pose, especially in its rare or archaic form in which it meant to puzzle, to baffle, to question closely or set against. Pose is also an obsolete term for a hoard or secret treasure. The political dimension opened up with pose in mind carries with it a sense of politics as deceit, opposition, and the keeping of a share of secrets.

By Michael Davidge. *Michael Davidge is the Artistic Director of Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre.*