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Patricia Smart

Moving Art Outside the Frame:
The Women Artists of Quebec's
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Provocations

The Centre for Canadian Studies is committed to encouraging wide-ranging debate about the nature of Canada, as a nation-state and a society. Provocations is an occasional paper series that is designed to explore key, new, or controversial issues related to Canada and the lived experiences of Canadians. This series is freely available from the Centre's web site. We hope that this series is broaden debate and understanding of Canada.

In this volume, Dr. Patricia Smart explores the dynamics of gender and abstract art through an examination of Automatiste women. The Automatiste movement, Dr. Smart tells us, represented a fundamental break in the narrative of Canadian art in its embrace of abstraction. The Automatiste move to abstraction was not purely aesthetic. It also represented a break with the ideal of intentionality in art in that it worked through a conception of sub-conscious representation. Women played a key role in the Automatiste movement and, in Dr. Smart's view, realized the fullness of its radical and artistic potential. The determination of gendered perspectives on art is, she tells us, inherently problematic and needs to avoid a biological essentialism that could, ultimately, disadvantage women. In their path-breaking work the women automatiste, however, a starkly different form of artistic practise that marked off Canadian abstraction from its European counterparts.

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Moving Art Outside the Frame:

The Women Artists of Quebec's Automatiste Movement

When they emerged onto the Canadian art scene, the group we now identify as the "Automatistes" were very young. Some were college aged; others younger. Under the guidance of their teacher and mentor Paul-Émile Borduas, it was the "Automatistes" who introduced abstraction into Canadian art, and members of the group like Jean-Paul Riopelle, Marcel Barbeau, Pierre Gauvreau, Fernand Leduc and Jean-Paul Mousseau are all now considered to be important figures in contemporary Canadian painting.

But at least as important as their art was the contribution that the "Automatistes" made to politics and culture through their manifesto *Refus global*, a twelve page mimeographed document they released in August 1948, which is now considered to be one of the most important founding documents of modern Quebec. Written by Borduas and signed by fifteen of his young disciples, it is a stirring denunciation of oppression in all its forms and a passionate affirmation of the transformative power of art.

The frontiers of our dreams are no longer the same ...

Beyond Christianity, we are touching the burning human brotherhood to which it has become a closed door.

The reign of fear in its many forms is ended ...

We invite those tempted by the adventure to join us.

We dare to imagine a time when man, liberated from his useless chains, will realise the fullness of his individual gifts - in the unpredictable and necessary order of spontaneity, in splendid anarchy.

Until then, without rest or pause, in a community of feeling with all those who thirst for a better life and regardless of the waiting, the encouragement or the persecution we may encounter, we will joyfully pursue our savage need of liberation.

The fifteen young artists who joined Borduas in drafting and signing the manifesto had honed their ideas over six years of discussion and artistic experimentation, reading Marx and Freud, listening to modern music ranging from Stravinsky and Varèse to jazz, blues and voodoo rhythms, and experimenting with avant-garde theatre and dance productions — always testing their own creative abilities against Borduas' teaching that all authentic art must spring from the very deepest and most mysterious realms of the self. If any one influence on their aesthetic and social ideas predominates, it is that of Surrealism, with its emphasis on the

interdependence of art, the liberation of the individual unconscious, and the transformation of society.

But the Automatistes were strikingly different from the Surrealists in at least one important way: eight of these fifteen young artists were women, and unlike the women associated with the Surrealist group, they were fully active and visible in the group's artistic creations in the 1940s. It is the work of these women — Madeleine Arbour, Marcelle Ferron, Muriel Guilbault, the three Renaud sisters (Louise, Thérèse and Jeanne), Françoise Riopelle and Françoise Sullivan — that will be the subject of this essay. One of the arguments I want to make is that it was their work, far more than that of the male members of the group, that carried on the revolutionary tradition of the manifesto after the 1940s, moving art out of the frames and galleries of the "academic" tradition the Automatistes had scorned into contact with life. In the course of trying to demonstrate this point, I will circle around the delicate issue of gender specificity in art : is it possible to identify gender-related differences in a work? And if so, how do elements which might have to do with biological difference interact with constructions of gender that are specific to a given culture or historical moment? I say "circling around" because in fact I do not believe there are any definitive answers to such questions. But, at the same time, I believe that by asking them we can often come to a better understanding of the motivations and dynamics that characterize women's and men's artistic productions. In the case of both the women and the men of the Automatiste group, for example, it is impossible to fully appreciate their work and the radical impact it had without setting it in the context of the traditional Quebec society with the rigidly prescribed gender roles that these artists came out of and wanted to change. Their work should also be examined in the context of the very sexist ideas about women and art of the French Surrealists who had such a huge influence on them.

In general, and unlike most of the male members of the group, who were painters and who remained painters throughout their careers, the women tended to move back and forth across the boundaries separating the arts from each other, or separating art from life. Françoise Sullivan, a talented young painter at the time she met the other early members of the group at Montreal's École des Beaux-Arts in 1940, had decided by the mid-1940s to concentrate on dance, which she had also studied from a young age. It was her choreographies and dance, along with those of Jeanne Renaud and later those of Françoise Riopelle that founded the dynamic tradition of modern dance in Montreal. Madeleine Arbour has been regarded for decades as one of the most important design artists in Quebec, but her first job (at the age of sixteen) was as a clerk at Birk's jewelry store in downtown Montreal, where she soon found herself designing Surrealist-inspired window displays, made with unusual combinations of branches, string, metal, objects, or flowers. People would get off the streetcar especially just to see her displays. In the 1950s, with the beginning of television, she became a household name in Quebec because of the children's television program she hosted and produced; and in the 1960s she became host of the very popular women's program *Femmes d'aujourd'hui*, while also making a name for her work as a an interior decorator. Thérèse Renaud, a poet during the 1940s while she with the Automatistes, later wrote an autobiography which offers a private view of the history of the Automatiste movement and a moving portrait of the challenges and obstacles faced by a woman writer who is also a wife and mother. And Marcelle Ferron, just at

the point where she had achieved international recognition as a painter -- in the early 1960s -- gave up this art because it had become too "easy" and turned for a period of ten years or more to stained glass public art (subway stations, hospitals, and other public buildings) because she wanted to reach the public -- the ordinary people she identified with and loved -- in the places they lived and worked. Thérèse Renaud's sister Louise Renaud, who left Montreal for New York in 1942 and worked as an au pair girl for the family of gallery owner Pierre Matisse, became an important link between the Automatistes and the Surrealists who spent the war years in exile in New York. She is the only one of the group to have abandoned her artistic work when she married and became a mother, and by so doing she became one of the many women of her generation whose stories have more or less disappeared from official history. Muriel Guibault, was probably the best-known of all the members of the group in the 1940s, thanks to her acting on stage and radio. A star at fifteen, best remembered today for her role as the female lead Marie-Ange in Gratien Gélinas's 1948 play *Tit-Coq*. Muriel was a striking physical beauty surrounded by admirers throughout her career, and yet plagued by depression and alcoholism. In January 1952, at the age of 29, she committed suicide. Her tragedy reminds us of the almost insurmountable difficulty that must have been experienced by many women attempting to break out of traditional female roles and accede to a confident sense of self in the stifling climate of 1940s Quebec.

The work of these women is important, and yet for almost fifty years after *Refus global's* publication it was barely mentioned in the dozens and even hundreds of articles and books on the Automatistes. Women's art has often been ignored or dismissed by those whose writings have made up the discipline of art history; certainly the women in the Surrealist group suffered a similar fate until the advent of feminist art criticism in the 1980s. Among the challenges we confront in looking at the Automatiste women is the fact that so much of their art was in ephemeral realms as such acting, dance, performance or window design, whose traces quickly disappear. As well, there was a lack of written documentation: for, unlike the correspondences of male members of the group like Borduas, Fernand Leduc and Claude Gauvreau, all of which have been published, hardly any of the letters written by the women -- including Louise Renaud's very important letters to the Automatistes from New York -- have been kept. The only correspondence of a woman that has survived from the 1940s is the marvelous letters of Marcelle Ferron to her brother Jacques, one of Quebec's best-known writers, and they owe their conservation to his importance in literary history and not to her own considerable celebrity.

In looking at the Automatiste women, I was looking for signs of these women's *difference* in both social and aesthetic terms. First, their difference from the larger society around them, made dramatically obvious by their courage in daring to commit themselves to a radical group and sign a manifesto that was not only anarchist but atheist, at a time when the Catholic Church in Quebec was extremely powerful and conservative, particularly in its views on the role of women. The second order of difference -- of aesthetics and the gender dynamics of the Automatiste group -- itself is more difficult to assess. Because Automatiste art is entirely non-figurative (or "abstract"), the development a gendered reading of their work is much more difficult than it would be for example with Surrealist paintings, where mutilated and

decapitated female bodies abound.

I would argue, however, that Automatiste art represents an even more radical descent into the depths of the unconscious than Surrealist art, with its recurrent images of fragmented female bodies. Inspired by the spontaneity of the art of children he was teaching in the early 1940s, Borduas arrived at the idea of a gestural art that would release and express impulses from the depths of the unconscious at a point prior to the imposition of any conscious images or representations. This art is one that is at once completely political in its desire to transform society by transforming the spectator, and completely without a message. The question, then, becomes this: at this level of the unconscious, is it possible to detect gender differences?

There is a story about the first meeting of one of these young women with Paul-Émile Borduas that captures the paradoxical relationship between women and Automatism. In the winter of 1945, after much hesitation, the young Marcelle Ferron screwed up her courage and telephoned Borduas, a teacher at Montreal's École du meuble whom she had never met. His paintings had stunned her when she had seen them in a small exhibition a few months earlier. Ferron had studied for a year with the painter Jean-Paul Lemieux, but had abandoned her studies when he refused to answer her questions about modern art, saying that Cubism and other such developments had no importance, and besides, that a woman would never be able to do such work anyway. Since then, married and the mother of a baby girl, she had continued painting on her own, producing figures that she now describes as "huge symbolic women", often placed in cemeteries (perhaps in unconscious memory of her own artist mother, who had died when she was seven years old). But she was feeling lost, and confided that to Borduas, who with characteristic generosity took the streetcar to her home so he could look at her work.

These early Ferron paintings no longer exist, but we can imagine them if we look at certain non-figurative works of her later years, often carrying titles that suggest personal or artistic identity. These paintings, I think, still bear the imprint of the style of Jean-Paul Lemieux. Borduas' analysis of these paintings was a turning point for Ferron, who soon found herself involved in the Automatiste group, which seemed the perfect realisation of dreams she had always had of artistic and political community. Borduas was unimpressed by her female figures, but he was very excited by the background of the paintings, which she had done with a palette knife. Here is Ferron's account of their meeting: "He looked at my paintings and said 'This is literature, but that is painting.' Because my symbolic women were in cemeteries, and the cemeteries were done with a palette knife, full of colour and spontaneity, very joyful. And he said: 'The cemeteries are authentic painting, but the women are just literature. Come to the École du meuble, and I'll show you some Matisse paintings, I'll show you how to read a painting.' For me, it was a moment of revelation."

In this interest in the colour, texture and joy that emerge spontaneously onto the canvas before any attempt at symbolization or figuration, there is a thumbnail portrait of the whole Automatiste aesthetic, and of the paradoxical way in which, even as it distanced women from specifically 'feminine' concerns, it liberated their creativity in ways that had no precedent in the history of French-Canadian art. Moving from the aesthetic to the social level, we find the same

paradox, in that these young women acceded to their creative expression within a group whose radical newness in Quebec culture consisted in the fact that it placed humanity -- rather than God -- at the center of its world-view. These women were between about sixteen and nineteen years of age at the time of the group's greatest cohesion and did not at the time define themselves as feminists (like many other women, however, they came to embrace this self-definition in their thirties). Instead, they identified fully with the generic "man" referred to throughout the manifesto. "What Borduas taught us was the right of man to his full expression as man", says Françoise Sullivan in typical language. She adds: "I never thought of not doing something because I was a woman; I just went ahead and did it." Rather than focussing on women's difference, the Automatistes seem to have taken their equality for granted, thus giving them confidence in themselves as well as the sense that their artistic work was almost a mission in a society where censorship and intimidation by Church and state were the rule rather than the exception.

Although all of the Automatiste women insist on the fact that they were equal members of the group, one has to wonder whether it was really possible for any group in the 1940s — in Quebec or elsewhere — to have had real equality between the sexes. There are some signs that, for Borduas at least, there was something of a gender hierarchy in the group, with painting (associated with men) being privileged over the other arts. For example, he sometimes compared the group to a family, and spoke of his influence over them as the legacy of a father to his sons. On the other hand, the women's claims of equality are borne out by the group's productions: the publication in 1946 of Thérèse Renaud's *Les Sables du rêve*, the first work of Surrealist poetry in Quebec literature; the Surrealist collages and windows of Madeleine Arbour; Ferron's paintings; an avant-garde play, *Bien-être*, written for Muriel Guilbault by Claude Gauvreau and starring her and the author; and finally the dance recital put on by Françoise Sullivan and Jeanne Renaud in April 1948 that is seen today as the founding event in Quebec's modern dance tradition. A condescending newspaper article by Jean Simard entitled "Portrait of a Young Automatiste Girl", which appeared in 1947, indicated that the visibility of women in the group was something that was both noticed and not supported, at least by members of the Quebec elite. Simard accuses them of being dilettantes who are incapable of thinking for themselves and anxious to jump on whatever bandwagon happens to be in style. In order to be sure of convincing his readers of the danger of these young revolutionaries, he throws in a reference, common in those days, to the threat of Communism:

Let's be perfectly clear: we're not reproaching this young lady for her legitimate right to be up to date, we are reproaching her for exercising it at times without discrimination. A Surrealist play is not necessarily a successful play: like in all other areas, one finds masterpieces and pitiful flops. And when our young lady applauds them all with the same violence and the same enthusiasm, we can only conclude one of two things: either she is incapable of judging, or she is systematically in favour of all that is new, regardless of its quality - through a revolutionary tactic not unlike that of the Communists, who support all strikes and encourage all social disorder.

In order to tease out the intricacies of gender in the Automatiste art, it is important to examine its links with Surrealism. For while the Automatistes soon moved beyond their interest in Surrealist painting, they devoured the writings of the Surrealist's main theoretician André Breton, as well as those of Sade (rediscovered by the Surrealists), and of Georges Bataille and Antonin Artaud, all of which make sexual violence central aesthetic concerns. For example, Bataille wrote that the dream of Sade — the destruction of the resisting object by the subject seeking to possess it — is the goal of all philosophy and the key to the transgressive nature of art. Artaud is primarily known today for his "theatre of cruelty," in which extreme violence is proposed as the essence of theatrical experience. The young Automatistes do not seem to have had reservations about the sexual violence in these works. The young Marcelle Ferron, who adored being outrageous, wrote to her brother that she was enjoying Sade immensely, and hoped to get copies of his work to read to the whole family (especially her rather proper older sister, who she was sure would be scandalised):

I've just read Sade's "One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom". Ouf! It's inflammatory enough to burn the clothes off a nun. It gives one an idea of man's capabilities, and of the narrowness of our little world of acceptable pleasures. Sade's heroes are supersexual beings who fascinate me. I'm expecting three more books from France, which I'll send on to you - afterwards, I'll try to get some to read to the family.

For the Surrealists, woman was fantasized as child, monster, puzzle and as inspirer of "l'amour fou", a love that approached madness. Woman symbolised an irrational realm to which these men sought access through their art. She was paradoxically seen as all-powerful and yet as the Woman-Object of their creation, as in the humorous photo by Man Ray of poet Tristan Tzara, sitting and looking rather perplexed in front of a huge photograph of a female nude. In another Man Ray photograph, "La centrale surréaliste", we see thirteen of the Surrealists in their meeting place on rue Jacob in Paris. If you look closely you can see a naked female figure, headless and armless, floating above them: obviously their mascot, which may explain why the two women in the photo seem to feel so obviously ill at ease.

Before moving towards complete abstraction, the Automatistes completed a number of works that are clearly Surrealist in inspiration, not only in their techniques but in the gender dynamic they display. In an interesting National Gallery exhibition called "Prelude to Automatism" which toured the country a few years ago, curator Denise Leclerc brought together some of these previously unknown works. An untitled 1947 collage by Jean-Paul Mousseau is an example of the "sadistic" pleasure of decapitation and switching of heads and bodies, made explicit to the spectator by the ink-drawn scars on the pianist's neck. A much earlier work, Fernand Leduc's 1940 ink drawing *Le monstre*, is a surrealist exploration of dream and mythology in which a hybrid creature with elements of a horse, a dragon and a human being raises an arm which is also a naked female with hair made up of other small female nudes. And in Borduas's *The Beaten Woman*, a fascinating transformation done in 1946 of his own 1941 painting *Nude Seen from the Back*, we see what critic François-Marc Gagnon calls "a desire to make more explicit the unconscious erotic content of earlier works. *A Nude Seen from the Back* becomes a *Beaten*

Woman, as if the subconscious meaning of such a posture could only be an invitation to flagellation". Claude Gauvreau's 1946 "dramatic objects" or playlets, entitled *Entrailles* (Entrails) are full of similar examples of an identification of artistic inspiration, eroticism and a sadistic destruction of women. In contrast, Madeleine Arbour's untitled collage from 1946 juxtaposes a woman's head, a hand, a staircase and various elements from nature, not in order to shock or to dissect, as in Mousseau's collage, but rather to create an effect of harmony and beauty, and invite the spectator to dream. Collage is also used in Thérèse Renaud's 1946 collection of poetry *Les Sables du rêve*, the first Automatiste literary work, where the author juxtaposes contradictory words and images, expressing a dream world energized by a passionate but innocent sexual desire. This is very different from the tormented and aggressive eroticism found in the work of Claude Gauvreau. As in Arbour's windows, we are struck by the desire to transform daily existence into something marvelous; as one critic states, "the originality of these Surrealist images is in the way one of the two juxtaposed elements is always part of the most banal reality. There is a sudden eruption of the extraordinary into the ordinary realm, as in the world of fantasy or fairy tale".

The point of such comparisons is not so much to accuse the male artists of sexism, as to begin to establish the grounds for identifying gender differences in the more difficult to analyse non-figurative works. Any attempt to identify what is "feminine" about women's art has to tread very carefully, being attentive to what may be characteristic of women's art in a particular cultural moment, while avoiding essentialist categories that would trap women yet again in the inferior side of the dualistic hierarchy of values created by patriarchal culture. In the case of these women's art, what is particularly striking is their refusal of the dualisms taken for granted in much of "high art" (for example, the separation of art from life), and their conscious attempt to deconstruct the same. Their works tend to illustrate a very different aesthetic from the men's: one oriented towards the bodily, towards movement rather than immobility, and towards the possibility of inhabiting space and transforming it rather than transcending it.

I have already alluded to the fact that many of these women chose to work in "ephemeral" arts like acting, dance or design, and already in this choice of the bodily and the concrete realm I think it is possible to detect signs of gender difference. This is not a difference of biological essence, but a refusal or inability to abstract themselves from the everyday world that seems characteristic of many women. The work of two of the most famous male members of the group — Borduas and Claude Gauvreau — exemplifies what we might call the tragic male tradition, which pushes beyond all limits, seeking a realm of absolute truth or beauty, and too often seems to founder or break in the process. Gauvreau's poetry, which attempts to imitate the non-figurative Automatiste paintings in the realm of language, goes beyond meaning into a realm of pure sound and incommunicability, and indeed, from 1955 on, Gauvreau spent much of his life incarcerated in psychiatric institutions. In 1970, a few days before his play *Les Oranges sont vertes* was scheduled for production by one of Quebec's most established theatre companies, he committed suicide. Paul-Émile Borduas' evolution is also marked by the experience of solitude, rupture and exile, beginning with the loss of his livelihood and breakup of his family after the publication of *Refus global* in 1948. In the years before his death in Paris in 1960, he produced the great, almost mystical paintings of his final period, torn apart by an

impossible-to-resolve tension between the absolutes of black and white. It is interesting to compare these works to the mature paintings of Marcelle Ferron, where the space of the painting is not one of static tension, but of an unending circulation of energy, colour and light. In fact, Ferron, who was very close to Borduas in the years before his death in Paris in 1960, recounts that she told him once that she would like to bring him back to colour, to which he replied: "To do that, you'd have to bring me back to life." In the 1940s, there is another Automatiste work by a woman that offers an interesting contrast with Borduas's black-and-white paintings: Françoise Sullivan's choreography "Duality", which she and Jeanne Renaud performed in 1948. In it the two dancers, one in black and the other in white, seem to be showing us how, by the movement and incarnation of dance, the struggle between opposites can be transformed into reconciliation and then into a new opposition, in a movement that mimes the constant change inherent in life.

A primary characteristic of French-Canadian society at the time the Automatiste group was together was indeed its dualistic value system, based on a hierarchical privileging of heaven over earth, spirit over matter, reason over emotion, and man over woman. For the Automatistes, this value system was the primary cause of man's alienation, and for them beauty and meaning were to be found in matter: "La matière chante" (Matter sings) was the name of one of their exhibitions. Or, as their manifesto puts it: "Our reason has allowed us to dominate the world, but it is a world where we have lost our unity." As I've already suggested, it is in the women's work that we see the most successful breaking down of these dualisms, as for example in Françoise Sullivan's text "Dance and Hope", contained in the same mimeographed booklet as the manifesto in 1948. "In dance", she writes, "we are returning today to the magic of movement.... It is a question of putting into action the expressive excess contained within the human body, this marvelous instrument, and of rediscovering for modern purposes the truths that were already known to primitive peoples.... To arrive at that point, we must put into question the whole of man's organism, not fearing to go as far as possible in exploring his total being".

In Sullivan's own choreographies, we see precisely this liberation of a sexual energy - as in *Dédale (Labyrinth)*, where the dancer, with no musical accompaniment, starts with a simple balancing movement of the left wrist and allows her whole body to be gradually overtaken by frenetic movement; or *Black and Tan Fantasy*, danced with an innocent and primitive sensuality and humour to the accompaniment of a Duke Ellington jazz tune. In *Danse dans la neige*, photographed by Maurice Perron in 1948, Sullivan moves dance outside the frames or borders of traditional art into communion with the natural landscape of Quebec winter, displaying a concern with nature and ecology that will be a recurring theme in her later work. (This ecological concern is also present in the manifesto, which, quite amazingly for a 1948 document, states that "technological progress has allowed us to impose a straightjacket on our tumultuous rivers as we await the disintegration of the planet. Our scientific instruments give us extraordinary means of investigation, of control over what we perceive as too small, too rapid, too vibrant, too slow or too large for us".) As for Jeanne Renaud's choreographies of the 1940s, they are more closely allied with the social critique contained in the manifesto: as in the feminine and even feminist *Un monsieur me suit dans la rue*, danced to an Edith Piaf song; and

Déformité, inspired by her years studying dance in New York, where she mimes the terror of a woman faced with the violence of urban life.

When women artists rebel against the frames and institutions that have traditionally enclosed art, they run the risk of seeing their work relegated to the realm of the "private" rather than "public", of "craft" rather than high art. This sort of ghettoization is resisted by the *Refus global* women, who have frequently insisted on the importance for them of the manifesto's aim of transforming society through art. The most obvious illustration of this is probably the public works in stained glass done by Marcelle Ferron in the 1960s and 70s, which include not only the Granby courthouse, but two subway stations in Montreal.

Françoise Sullivan's career provides, perhaps the, the most emblematic illustrates of movement, metamorphosis and resistance to being "framed" by societal expectations. As noted, Sullivan originally made her reputation as a dancer and choreographer, and she returned to the art in which she was originally trained — painting — only about 1980. Even in her shift from the realm of the body and its movement in space to the more static and "permanent" forms of the visual arts, there is a woman's story and a woman-centred aesthetic. Each stage of her evolution has been marked by a coming to terms with an apparent dead end, a feeling of being blocked, and an ability to listen to the unconscious and follow it in new directions (which is the main lesson she claims to have learned from Borduas). Not only her choreographies, but her sculpture, her photography, her performance art and finally her painting, are characterized by an attention to the traces of everyday reality outside the frame of the work, to the movement and balance of bodies and matter in space, and to the bringing together of modern and postmodern perceptions with the most archaic traces of memory and culture.

A recurring form in all of Sullivan's work, both in dance and visual art, is the circle and the spiral, suggesting the idea of a living line with no beginning or end — the search for an origin that is by definition unattainable. By the 1970s, Sullivan was still resisting the idea of going back to painting, which at the time she could only imagine as trapping the fluidity of what she wanted to express within the confines of a frame, dominating the real rather than allowing its voice to emerge. So she moved into a period of interesting performance art (for example, she had herself photographed walking the distance between two important Montreal art institutions, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the Museum of Contemporary Art, against a background of oil refineries and urban desolation that suggested the distance between reality and traditional concepts of art). By the late 1970s she was integrating the idea of blockages and of being blocked into her performance work, first in acrylic paintings, and later in photo and performance art (sometimes using dancers).

The recurrent "blockage" Sullivan was experiencing in these years was due to the fact that she was attracted to painting, and yet resistant to the idea of cutting herself off from the multiplicity and contradictions and feel of the real world and of nature. In 1980 there was a breakthrough, marked by the beginning of her "Tondo" series, a breakthrough she describes in the following way: "Then one day I cut my canvas into a circle. It had been folded up; I threw the paint onto it with my hands, and it settled into the folds and left traces when it dried. That

was the beginning of the Tondos. Later, the openings, collages, and objects added themselves to the process." The Tondos have no frames; they are cut from the original shape of the canvas, and the painting takes shape from the original material rather than being imposed on it. The addition of objects from home or studio - bits of wood or string, or a piece of metal - breaks the perfection and closure of the circle and brings traces life into into the work. Gradually representation creeps into them, leading to three further series, each one growing out of the one that precedes it in a sort of metamorphosis. In the "Je parle" works from the early 1980s, the artist seems to be evoking a state of fusion with nature. In the magnificent "Cycle crétois" (Cretan Cycle), she has returned to representation, in paintings that show mythological creatures and often express concern about the future of the planet even as they return to the primitive beginnings of time.

Now eighty-two years old, Françoise Sullivan is at the very height of her creative powers, and has finally, after a whole career of resistance to it, accepted working within a frame — doing non-figurative paintings, usually in a single colour, but layered in a way that suggests multiple variations of light, shifting in a way that perhaps suggests she's still resisting enclosure. In a sense, but more interestingly in many ways, she is now doing the kind of work that the male members of the group were doing in the 1940s, while she herself was working in dance. I like to think of her as saying to herself at that age that there was no hurry: she had a whole life ahead of her to live, a whole spectrum of artistic mediums she wanted to try out, and a whole planet to explore, both spatially and temporally, before she would settle down and do paintings of the kind Borduas was teaching them about. In a sense she's come full circle — back to Borduas, the adored teacher who had taught her above all that if she could listen to the voice of her inner self, she was capable of anything. But it is the life outside the frame, and the work that breaks with artistic conventions that bears emphasis not only in Sullivan's work but in that of all the women of the Automatiste group.