



Zoë Tousignant, ed. *Gabor Szilasi: The Art World in Montreal, 1960-1980*. Montreal: McCord Museum, 2019. 160 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-895615-39-5.

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Gabor Szilasi: The Art World in Montreal, 1960-1980 is both a celebration and contemplation of an era of Montreal art life. Book editor and associate curator of photography at the McCord Museum Zoë Tousignant has selected one hundred photographs, drawn from Gabor Szilasi's extensive collection of 35mm film negatives, featuring the vernissages of Montreal's art world-in-the-making during the 1960s and 1970s. The book is an expansion of an exhibition of forty-three of Szilasi's photographs, which were displayed at the McCord Museum in 2017. Three contributing essays offer different points of entry into Szilasi's work and provide visual analysis and historical context for the images. Also included are excerpts from a 2017 interview between Tousignant and Szilasi.

Gabor Szilasi was born in Hungary and immigrated to Montreal in 1957. He began photographing art openings, or vernissages, which he attended with his wife and artist Doreen Lindsay, as an entrée to the Montreal arts community. His photographs portray people and places and some of the social and cultural shifts taking place in Montreal's art scene during this period. Szilasi's photographic record documents a visual arts community, capturing individuals who "would shape the history of art in Canada" (p. 17).

The addition of Szilasi's contact sheets with attendant annotations, cropping, and editorial

marks serves as evidence of a past analogue practice and Szilasi's creative process in framing his photographs. Distributed at the front and back of the book, the contact sheets parallel the sequential unfolding of historical events and impart an important context for the individual images by revealing the aggregate structure or format of the images, which is often lost in curatorial practices of display. The inclusion of Szilasi's contact sheets, while adding aesthetic appeal, is also testament to Tousignant's approach to photographs. Appreciating photographic materiality and preserving context and intention mitigates the mutability of the photographic image. The significance of the social, cultural, and institutional contexts of the photographs is established with the addition of the three essays and interview excerpts. In viewing the images, readers are thus aided in understanding Szilasi's photographs.

Zoë Tousignant's essay, "Gabor's Art World," offers an outline of the institutional history of Szilasi's collection. Describing the scope and content of the photographs, Tousignant states that "art is not the main subject of the photographs"; rather, people—artists, gallery owners, curators, critics, collectors, and other individuals—are "at the forefront of Szilasi's documentation of Montreal's art world" (p. 20). According to Tousignant, "the project's strength resides also, and more importantly

for the purposes of this essay, in its inventory of the *contexts* for contemporary art in Montreal at the time.” Szilasi’s photographs are “a record of the physical and social structures that disseminated contemporary art during a period of rapid expansion and change in the history of art in Montreal, Quebec and Canada. The images, in other words, while not representing much of art itself, are a representation of its legitimizing frame—the art world” (p. 20). Tousignant then briefly details cultural changes in the Montreal art scene and the shifts in venues from commercial galleries and museums to multimedia art galleries and artist-run centers reflecting artistic experimentation of the period and various spaces of dissemination. Szilasi’s images capture this evolution in art and art practice that occurred in Montreal during this period. The individuals he photographed, “how they looked and how they behaved—changed over the years, just as the sanctioning frame for art changed” (p. 24).

Photography historian Martha Langford, in her brief essay, “Caution! Artists at Work: Gabor Szilasi and the Vernissage Group Portrait,” discusses the “performative role of Szilasi’s photographs as constitutive of Montreal’s art world” (p. 18), or, as Langford argues, art worlds-in-the-making—becoming “intergenerational, intercultural, and intermedia” (p. 30). The final essay, “My Father’s Vernissage Photos,” by artist Andrea Szilasi (Gabor Szilasi’s daughter) is a personal reminiscence of her experiences attending art openings with her parents. Her descriptions of some of the vernissages she attended are cherished, intimate, and colorful accounts. Recalling fashion, hairstyles, and conversations overheard she shares, “I also felt that the conversations taking place at vernissages were the best that conversations could be. Artists, people who had materialized their concepts into something physical, were talking about that process and everything else at the same time” (p. 32). Her description of reviewing her father’s contact sheets, “tiny 1-1/2 x 1 inch pictures ... like holding a little world in your hand” (p. 35), also serves as a

notable reminder that the images selected, enlarged, and displayed in both the book and the exhibition have been altered from their original format for publication and display through institutional and aesthetic practices. The interview excerpts between Tousignant and Szilasi at the conclusion of the book offer reflections on the “broader significance of this corpus within his oeuvre” (p. 18). Through her interview questions, Tousignant has returned to the first moments of the photograph’s creation to hear the specific historical contexts in which Szilasi created his images.

The book’s design is beautiful. Opening the hardback cover of the book is like opening a Solander box of archival photographs preserving twenty years of Montreal art society. Typesetting and layout are pleasing, images have been given lots of space, and there is generous white space throughout the book. However, the book’s very tight inside margins make reading text portions a little unwieldy and damage to the book’s spine inevitable.

Tousignant’s focus on Szilasi’s motivation, his methods, and his medium are evidence of her support of the photograph’s documentary merit and utility. *Gabor Szilasi: The Art World in Montreal 1960-1980* is a beautiful reminiscence for contemporary viewers of the Montreal art scene during this period of social and cultural change and will appeal to those interested in the photograph as documentary record. Readers are encouraged to visit the McCord Museum website for further engagement with the work of Gabor Szilasi, particularly the video “Vernissages,” which presents excerpts from interviews conducted by Tousignant for the 2017 exhibition.[1]

Note

[1]. <https://www.musee-mccord.qc.ca/en/exhibitions/gabor-szilasi-photographs/>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-canada>

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