

# “QUEBEC’S DOCUMENTARY TRADITION”: WHAT TRADITION? WHAT DOCUMENTARY?

BY SERGE ALLAIRE

To reflect on the documentary tradition in Quebec photography, as Sherry Simon notes in a recent essay, is to be torn between “observing the present and dreaming the ideal,” between a horizontal dimension and a vertical one – since culture, unavoidably, is an arena of competing tensions and visions.<sup>1</sup> Given a context in which documentary photography (be it socially conscious or otherwise) engenders more suspicion than interest,<sup>2</sup> and at a time when it is seemingly constrictive,<sup>3</sup> what is the point of engaging in such a reflection? Is it to light the way for a younger generation of photographers who are uninterested in it? Is there not a risk that asking such questions will be perceived, if not as an attempt at resuscitation, then as a warning cry?<sup>4</sup> And that this exhibition<sup>5</sup> will result in a nostalgic view being taken of a practice today considered obsolete?

The notion of tradition – a weighty one because it revives the issue of identity and speaks to the issues of distinctiveness and historical destiny – cannot easily resist the splintering effects of postmodernism. Taken to its logical extreme, postmodern rationality would make possible “the extinction of the generic term ‘photography’ and the expression of its potential states using several terms that would remain to be invented.”<sup>6</sup> Serge Jonqué prefers the idea of a school to that of a tradition and, in referring to Quebec photography of the 1970s, speaks instead of a “Quebec documentary school.” More recently, Gaëtan Gosselin has suggest-



Claire Beaugrand-Champagne, M. et Mme Montpetit, Montréal, 1974, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 28 x 35,5 cm.



Claire Beaugrand-Champagne, Mme Foucault, Montréal, 1974, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 28 x 35,5 cm.



Claire Beaugrand-Champagne, M. Malinowski, Montréal, 1974, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 28 x 35,5 cm.

ed that the idea of a tradition, which would result in a singular approach to practice stemming from a distinct cultural and artistic community, is today in danger of being seen as illusory. “[A]rt,” he writes, “cannot be limited to monolithic attitudes essentially devoted to ensuring the longevity of an ancestral dream!”<sup>7</sup> Could it be, precisely, that today our notion of the existence of a Québécois documentary tradition, which emerged at the end of the 1970s with a new generation of photographers, is fading into a misty mirage?

Considering the documentary tradition in Quebec photography means, first of all, defining its cultural difference, its distinctiveness – which refers directly to Quebec’s cultural landscape, its debates and its political issues, more often than not defined in terms of its metropolis, Montreal. Depending on the writer, and the point of view, a photographer may in one instance be considered to be Canadian, and in others, Québécois. Sometimes, the same photographer may even be viewed as both. What, then, are the criteria by which we are to define this tradition? Ethnicity, language, citizenship? Territory? Geographical unity? A sense of shared identity? Each of these aspects has played a key role in the quest for a Québécois identity that photographers have sought to circumscribe.

In the present day, however, this reflection comes up against the whole problem of “identity and culture,” and it is no longer posited in the terms that we heard in the late 1970s. To explore a documentary tradition demands that one account for, on the one hand, the transformations undergone by society, and on the other, any current reflections on the issues raised by such exploration. Nevertheless, in the specific context of Québec, there is no getting around the political stakes of such an endeavour – one can go so far as to view the whole political discourse on identity, for instance, as a stumbling block.



Claire Beaugrand-Champagne, Mme Gélina, Foyer Émilie-Gamelin, Montréal, 1973, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 28 x 35,5 cm.



Claire Beaugrand-Champagne, Mme Meunier, Montréal, 1973, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 28 x 35,5 cm.



Claire Beaugrand-Champagne, M. Ernest Russel, Montréal, 1973, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 28 x 35,5 cm.

In her critical analysis of the issues at stake in the identity/culture/tradition triad, Simon emphasizes how difficult it is today to delineate with any confidence the contours of individual and collective identity, and she warns of the gap between the exigencies of the political discourse on identity and reality, which is that of a plurality of real-life identities: “The political discourse around identitism involves [. . .] demands that have little to do with the true plurality of identities in day-to-day life.”<sup>8</sup> While I cannot presume to fully address all of these questions here, it does seem possible to embark on and refine a reading of the history of photography in Quebec, to effect a reconsideration of the discourse that, since the late 1970s, has posited the existence of a documentary tradition as essentially devoted to the search for an image of *Homo quebecensis*.

Since the exhibition *Photographie documentaire au Québec, début des années 70* (organized in 1979 by Pierre Dessureault) and until very recently, it has been common practice to conceive of the appearance of a documentary tradition – respecting a certain number of parameters – as essentially tied to the affirmation of a new generation of Francophone photographers in Quebec during the 1970s, within an effervescent sociopolitical context. The work of Pierre Gaudard and Gabor Szilasi as figureheads, and the formation of groups – the Groupe d’Action Photographique (GAP), initially consisting of Michel Campeau, Roger Charbonneau, and Serge Laurin, later joined by Gaudard, Szilasi, and then Claire Beaugrand-Champagne; the Groupe des Photographes Populaires (GPP), with Alain Chagnon, André Sénécal, and Jean Fiorito; and Photo-Cell, formed by Clara Gutsche and David Miller – served to define and name the constitutive period (1971–76) of Quebec documentary photography that, since then, has been consid-



Claire Beaugrand-Champagne, *Portugaise*, Montréal, 1974, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 28 x 35,5 cm.



Michel Campeau, *Baseball*, Parc Jarry, Montréal, 1973, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 40,6 x 50,8 cm.



Michel Campeau, *Hypermarché*, Ville de Laval, 1976, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 40,6 x 50,8 cm.

ered the tradition's source: *engagé* photography whose goal was to "create a portrait of *Homo quebecensis* and his surroundings."

In the wake of that initial legitimizing discourse, it would seem, recent discourse has led to a series of shifts in meaning, because the facts of the original discourse have been renewed without any challenging of the conditions for emergence, any evaluation of their relevance, or any serious questioning of the images belonging to the tradition. What concerns, then, are driving photographers? What image of "*Homo quebecensis*" or of Quebec culture is in fact revealed to us in these documentary practices?

One of these semantic shifts has retained only one dimension of the mini-history that this discourse around 1970s documentary sought to convey: that of a "nationalism" restricting the definition of documentary to a "sociological voluntarism dedicated to the 'visual' assertion of an ideology: Québec nationalism."<sup>9</sup> This shift, it seems to me, mistakes reality for an effect of the discourse about reality – it fails to account sufficiently for the ambivalence or entanglements of the social forces prevailing during that period, something that more rigorous analysis would doubtless bring to light.

In starting from a selection of photographic essays with a city (Montreal) as a theme – in other words, images that pit preconceived notions against this representation of the documentary tradition – what I am interested in here, with this essay and this exhibition, is to effect a shift in point of view, to re-examine certain conditions that would enable us to reconsider the structures of the documentary tradition. The relatively limited number of photographic projects and essays is well suited, of course, to the limited exhibition space, but it



Michel Campeau, Famille, fête religieuse Portugaise, Montréal, 1980, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 40,6 x 50,8 cm.



Michel Campeau, Ange, fête religieuse portugaise, Montréal, 1980, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 40,6 x 50,8 cm.

Alain Chagnon, Taverne de Paris, Montréal, 1973, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 20 x 25,5 cm.

is also in keeping with the decision to present a greater number of photographs from each of the projects, to respect the integrity of each, and thus to encourage a reading that focuses attention not simply on the image, but on photography as a discursive practice.

First, however, I would like to briefly relate, in my own fashion, the story of the foundation, the “origin story” – with a view to setting limits on that story, and perhaps restructuring the terms of the narrative.

## **ORIGIN STORY: THE CONSTITUTIVE PERIOD, 1971–1976**

The boom that sparked the lightning rise of photography practices in the late 1960s and early 1970s, together with the prevailing currents of Quebec nationalism, were enough for one critic to proclaim, in a December 1972 review of a show by the members of GAP, “Québécois photography is born.”<sup>10</sup> Pierre Dessureault organized an exhibition of this early photographic production in 1979, under the title *Photographie documentaire au Québec, début des années 70*, postulating the emergence – around Gabor Szilasi, Pierre Gaudard, and the U.S. social documentarists – of a youthful Francophone documentary photography tradition, concerned with creating “a portrait of *Homo quebecensis* and his surroundings.” This new documentary photography signalled a break from the documentary practice of state agencies (linked to propaganda), and also from the social representations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (because the bourgeoisie portrayed through William Notman’s lens no longer existed) and of the mid-twentieth century (e.g., Monsignor Albert Tessier’s idealizations of peasant life). Because they lacked reference markers and a well-entrenched tradition, a new generation of photographers saw in the work of Gaudard,



Alain Chagnon, Taverne de Paris, Montréal, 1973, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 20 x 25,5 cm.



Alain Chagnon, Taverne de Paris, Montréal, 1973, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 20 x 25,5 cm.

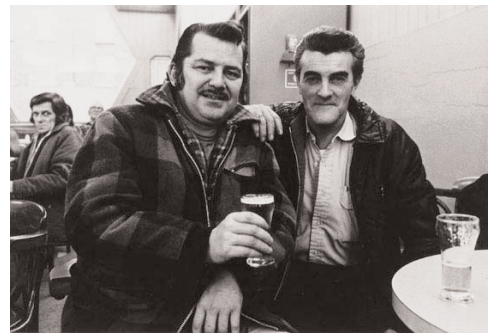


Alain Chagnon, « Ti -Rat », Taverne de Paris, Montréal, 1973, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 20 x 25,5 cm.

Szilasi, and the U.S. social documentary tradition a “crucible for emulation.” Dessureault described photography in Québec in three thrusts:

Some, like Gabor Szilasi, have taken it upon themselves to preserve an image of rural Québec, which is threatened with extinction. Others, like Pierre Gaudard, have focused on creating a portrait of a milieu that is vital and undergoing perpetual change. For many photographers, however, recording or describing social reality was not enough: photography had to be part of a political and social awareness and awakening. *Milton Park* sought to delineate the social implications of the destruction of a Montréal neighbourhood. [. . .] The members of the GPP took part in the grass-roots struggles. [. . .] The members of the GAP produced a much-discussed document, *Disraeli*. This portrait of a rural municipality represented one aspect of their overall commitment: to create a portrait of *Homo quebecensis* and his surroundings.<sup>11</sup>

Though he more or less followed the parameters established by Dessureault, Serge Jongué took a new tack with regard to the *Disraeli* project, which Dessureault had described as one aspect of a global project. Jongué saw it as emblematic of young documentary photography – a space through which “in 1972, for the first time, a large-scale documentation of a specific setting was embarked upon by young Québec photographers.” In Jongué’s view, *Disraeli* also embodied the archetype undergirding the explosive growth of this “young photography”: “The search for a mythical, populist incarnation of *Homo quebecensis*, a movement that was part and parcel, in its way, of the sense of cultural urgency that at the time was demanded by the aspirations of a besieged society.”<sup>12</sup>



Alain Chagnon, Taverne de Paris, Montréal, 1973, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 20 x 25,5 cm.



Alain Chagnon, Maison de chambres, rue Saint-Denis, Montréal, 1973, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 20 x 25,5 cm.



Alain Chagnon, « Ti-Rat » chez lui, maison de chambre, rue Saint-Denis, Montréal, 1973, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 20 x 25,5 cm.

## A HUMAN EXPERIMENT IN PHOTOGRAPHY: *DISRAELI* AND THE LIMITS OF A PARADIGM

Posited in this way as an “archetypal figure” of documentary practice, the *Disraeli* project considerably attenuates the complex conditions that prevailed during the boom in documentary photography during the 1970s. To ascribe this sort of special status to *Disraeli* is to continue to situate the reading of the issues concerning documentary essentially around the young generation of Francophone photographers and the so-called constitutive period of 1971–76, and creates a blinder effect that makes a more global vision of the decade’s issues impossible. Making *Disraeli* a paradigm means confining the history of documentary to a monolithic concept of nationalism and an ethnocentric vision of tradition. Following in Dessureault’s footsteps, Jongué revalidates the representation of the emergence of a tradition as an abrupt break with the practice of the Notman studios or that of Mgr Tessier, in the process displaying not only a misapprehension of the documentary photography practices of the 1960s but an incomplete understanding of the impact of documentary cinema in the same period, and of the potential affinities between the two genres – and at the same time suppressing important aspects of the issues specific to Montreal and Quebec during those years.<sup>13</sup>

Viewing the *Disraeli* project as paradigmatic of a Québécois tradition leads to a definition of the *modus vivendi* of the 1970s as the only vessel for a “mythical, populist incarnation of *H. quebecensis*,” without regard for the diversity of individual trajectories among the young photographers of the day, and without including or mentioning *engagé* documentary practices such as those of Clara Gutsche and David Miller of the Photo-Cell group, or of a photographer such as Brian Merrett. Lastly, the diversity and complexity of the issues exam-



Alain Chagnon, « Brother » chez lui (détail), maison de chambres, rue Saint-Denis, Montréal, 1974, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 20 x 25,5 cm.



Alain Chagnon, « Brother » chez lui, maison de chambres, rue Saint-Denis, Montréal, 1973, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 20 x 25,5 cm.



Serge Clément, Montréal, Qc, 1975, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 28 x 35,5 cm.

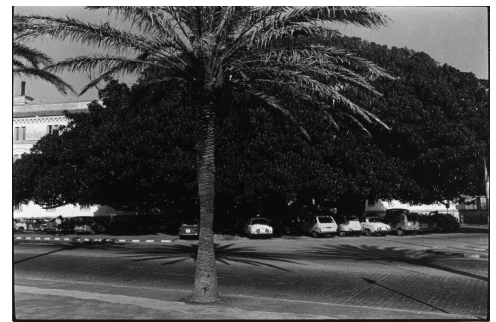
ined by the very champions of this practice – in the individual projects produced by the members of the GAP and the GPP – are considerably diminished. The titles speak for themselves, incidentally: *Les personnes âgées* (Elderly people, 1972–74) by Claire Beaugrand-Champagne; Michel Campeau’s *Les aveugles* (The blind, 1974); Alain Chagnon’s *La taverne* (The tavern, 1972–74).<sup>14</sup> Also excluded from possible insertion into the tradition is a whole swath of photography projects such as Serge Clément’s *Affichage et automobile* (Postering and cars, 1975–78) and the post-1975 emergence of a second wave of documentarists, including Groupe Plessisgraphe, Bertrand Carrière, and Alain Pratte, whose projects explored feminist and urban preoccupations.<sup>15</sup>

Without calling into question the importance of the *question nationale* to the dynamics of the documentary approach, it seems necessary today to reframe the history of Québec’s “documentary boom.” With hindsight comes the ability to observe from a distance the reading that existing discourses offer of that history. The emphasis placed on nationalism would seem, in effect, to stem more from the reading made than from the issues at stake in the projects or the concerns revealed in the images. Put another way, this reading seems especially to satisfy a need for expedient affirmation: recognition of a new generation of Francophone photographers, “which at the time,” Jongué observes, “was demanded . . . by the aspirations of a besieged society.”

Given its direct, participatory approach, its ideal of democratization and willingness to collaborate in the transformation of a society, and the possibility that it affords us to appraise the influence of a project such as Gabor Szilasi’s during the same period in a rural milieu – Charlevoix – the *Disraeli* project can be seen as an archetype of one photography practice. True, it was the



Serge Clément, Montréal, Qc, 1977, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 28 x 35,5 cm.



Serge Clément, Granada, Espagne, 1974, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 28 x 35,5 cm.



Serge Clément, Montréal, Qc, 1977, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 35,5 x 28 x cm.

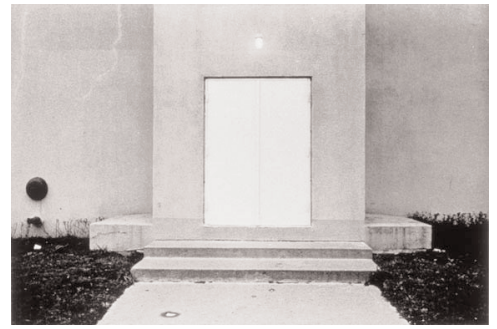


first major project mounted by a younger generation of Francophone photographers, but its importance becomes quite relative when one attempts to use it as the basis for defining the “fundamental” orientation of documentary practice in the 1970s as essentially that of the quest for “a mythical, populist incarnation of *H. quebecensis*.” An unwavering insistence on the nationalist dimension neglects other aspects, no less important, that determined photography practices of the day.

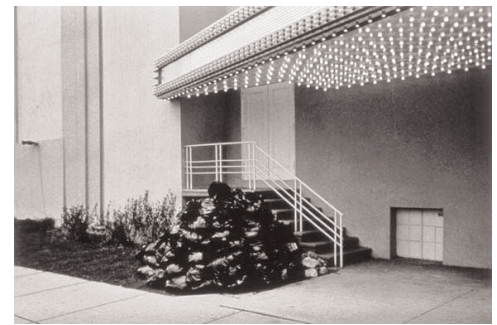
*Disraeli* is, overall, an exception among all the GAP projects – an exception insofar as it was and remains the only project produced in a rural municipality, outside the city, at a time when the photographers of the day were conducting the bulk of their production/investigation in the city. From this point of view at least, *Disraeli* seems to me utterly unsuited to any attempt at a global definition of the thematics of documentary work. There is also the fact that it corresponds more to the end of an era (that of rural Quebec) than to the start of one (that of new concerns and issues of interest to the generation of photographers asserting itself throughout the 1960s and 1970s).<sup>16</sup>

## RECONSTRUCTING THE ORDINARILY LIVED: THE CITY

That documentary practice of the 1970s was shot through with reflections on cultural identity is beyond debate. Nor would anyone doubt that the movement for national affirmation sparked a generation to speak out, and thus contributed to the individual affirmations of a new generation of Francophone photographers. But considering both the projects and the images produced during this period as well as the concerns revealed in them, the nationalist dimension is not as obvious as the discourses in question would have it. Other discourses and other aspects loom just as large,



Charles Gagnon, Exit, Montréal, 1973, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 15,9 x 24,1 cm.



Charles Gagnon, Marquise de théâtre et sacs à ordures, 1973, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 15,9 x 24,1 cm.



Charles Gagnon, Sans titre, Montréal, 1975, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 15,9 x 24,1 cm.

and will one day have to be taken into consideration rather than being crushed beneath ideologies.

Though politically the *question nationale* and the controversies surrounding it took centre stage and permeated all debate, one must also consider, among the social forces from which sprang the profound changes in Quebec society of the time, the labour union movement, the feminist and counterculture currents, and all the contradictions tearing at the proponents of socialism, Marxism, and nationalism. Thus, without losing sight of the fact that nationalist aspirations dominated the decade, one must also properly see how they were articulated and enmeshed with the overall forces that, at various times, prevailed in the cultural arena.

What is important to elucidate today is the urban (Montreal) dimension of the younger generation's photographic experimentation, so as to reframe this reading of the documentary tradition considered solely from the point of view of the *question nationale*. If there is one social movement that can be said to have profoundly marked the development of documentary photography since the 1960s and 1970s, it is that of popular, grass-roots demands, which has led struggles on behalf of empowerment and improvements in urban living conditions.<sup>17</sup> This movement led, beginning in the 1960s, to the formation of the neighbourhood groups and committees that became the key social actors of the day.<sup>18</sup> Stemming from the urban transformations and modernization of those times, an entire current of critical thinking was to lead, in its turn, to the creation of a variety of lobby groups devoted to safeguarding heritage architecture and the quality of the urban environment, such as Espace vert (1972), Sauvons Montréal/Save Montréal (1973), and Héritage Montréal (1975), which railed against unchecked, anarchic modernization of the metropolis and demanded that the



Charles Gagnon, Bâtisse après nettoyage au sable, Montréal, 1977, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 15,9 x 24,1 cm.



Charles Gagnon, Voûte avec camion et homme se tenant la tête, Montréal, 1973, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 15,9 x 24,1 cm.

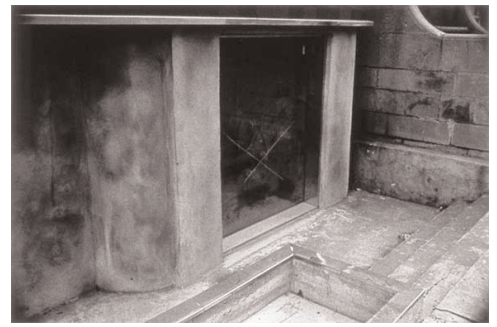


Charles Gagnon, Camion, borne-fontaine, portes bloquées, Montréal, 1977, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 15,9 x 24,1 cm.

administration of mayor Jean Drapeau adopt an urban planning policy. These movements produced forms of engagement and action that, melded with the *question nationale*, mobilized an entire generation of young photographers to embrace these causes or find in the neighbourhood committees and groups a space for awareness raising and conscience building. And it was working within these neighbourhood organizations – committees and newsletters such as *Le Bulletin populaire* and *Liaison Saint-Louis* – that many of them cut their teeth as photojournalists and honed their awareness of Montreal's urban realities.

More akin to the photography genre that is of interest here, projects such as Photo-Montréal (1972) and events such as *Montréal Plus or Minus?* (1972) and *Corridart* (1976) helped provide, to varying degrees, impetus to young photography along with a vision of the city as theatre of daily living. The example of Photo-Montréal (which featured most of the photographers whose work is being shown as part of the present exhibition) speaks volumes. The objective of this project, under the supervision of Michael White, Pierre Gaudard, and Sam Tata, was not only to build up an image bank of city spaces, but also, over the long term, to create a photo agency. In a communiqué addressed to photographers, Gaudard urged young Montreal photographers to adopt a critical view of social realities.<sup>19</sup>

*Montréal Plus or Minus?*, an event at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, sought, much as Photo-Montréal did, to raise citizens' awareness of their environment and urge them to become conscious of urban realities by paying attention to the transformations affecting that environment on a daily basis. The stance promoted by *Montréal Plus or Minus?* was, like that of Photo-Montréal, less about celebrating the picturesque and grandiose aspects of the urban landscape and more



Charles Gagnon, Vitrine avec un "x", Montréal, 1979, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 15,9 x 24,1 cm.



Clara Gutsche, Mme A, Courval, 4491 boul, St-Laurent, 1976, épreuve à la gélatine argentique virée au sélénium, 20,6 x 17,6 cm.



Clara Gutsche, Tailleur Phillips Tailors, 350 rue St-Antoine, 1979, épreuve à la gélatine argentique virée au sélénium, 20,6 x 17,6 cm.

about understanding a city's daily life and the everyday existence of the people inhabiting it: "The emphasis is put on a city that is foremost its people's city – on a city discovered in its streets, the parks, the signs, the graffiti, the water that one drinks, the life that we give to it."<sup>20</sup> In appealing to community interests – neighbourhood committees and lobby groups concerned about the city's future and environmental quality, artists, photographers – *Montréal Plus or Minus?* restored the connections between the political and the cultural from a critical perspective with regard to the directions that urban development was taking in Montreal. In choosing "Montréal, c'est nous autres" (We are Montreal) as the theme for the event, exhibition coordinator Melvin Charney linked urban planning – the physical development of the city – to social, political, and cultural questions. "Urbanism," he wrote in the introduction to the catalogue, "cannot be considered apart from the people it affects. [ . . . ] So a beautiful city makes no sense unless it creates a beautiful life for those who live in it."<sup>21</sup>

There was also a trend toward favouring, as an engine of this young documentary tradition, the quest for "the identity of *Homo quebecensis*" – forgetting that, in large measure, the political arena for that identity during the 1960s and 1970s was Montreal and its transformations. And that, if there was indeed an identity quest, it would be understood, among other ways, through a confrontation between the traditional foundations of that identity – rural, Catholic – and the new urban conditions: adaptation or accommodation to these new realities. In that respect, one can say that the "*Homo quebecensis*" leitmotif was interpreted in far too exclusively a nationalist sense, to the detriment of another significant recurring theme that cut across all the declarations of principles of the time, those of the GAP as well as those of the GPP: "reconstruction of



Clara Gutsche, Superior Pants: Mercerie pour hommes, boul. Saint-Laurent, 1978, épreuve à la gélatine argentique virée au sélénium, 17,6 x 20,6 cm.



Clara Gutsche, Budget Store, 671 Jean-Talon ouest, 1979, épreuve à la gélatine argentique virée au sélénium, 20,6 x 17,6 cm.



Clara Gutsche, Omega Pharmacy, Coin av. du Parc et Mont-Royal, 1978, épreuve à la gélatine argentique virée au sélénium, 17,6 x 20,6 cm.

the ordinarily lived.” As well, there has arguably not been enough consideration of the critical function of the photographic image being demanded by photographers, who recommended a shifting away from the stereotyped heroes conveyed in the media and from the influence of mass culture – which, as Sherry Simon points out, posed “a challenge to the myths and imagery of the specificity of national culture throughout the West, where the ideal of a monolithic national culture is proving increasingly difficult to actualize.”<sup>22</sup> Thus there has not been enough insistence on this component or on what it enables in terms of an understanding and explanation of the orientation of certain photography practices during the 1960s and 1970s in relation to the question of identity.<sup>23</sup>

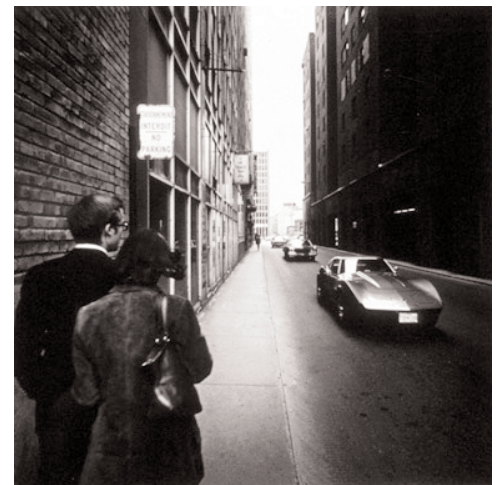
## A NEW ATTITUDE TOWARD THE CITY

The exhibition *Une tradition documentaire au Québec? Quelle tradition? Quel documentaire?*, which begins with a selection of images that does not claim to be exhaustive and proceeds by intuition rather than systematic investigation, and by observing the unsuitability of discourses to the documentary concerns seen in many photography projects of the 1970s, adopts a wider cultural perspective. That perspective opens onto themes that reject any division along ethnic or linguistic lines so as to enable a new reading of the issues addressed by documentary photographers in representing the city.

With the 1960s came a change in attitude toward the city. The decade witnessed a shift from impressionistic realism, which conveyed “atmospheres of the urban environment,” to a new approach to the city as a space for investigation and representation, one in which the photographer’s lens tracked social values in urban artefacts and behaviours. Thus the quest for cultural



Clara Gutsche, Baggio Cycle and Sport, 6975 boul. St-Laurent, 1977, épreuve à la gélatine argentique virée au sélénium, 17,6 x 20,6 cm.



Brian Merrett, Corvette, boul. de Maisonneuve, Montréal, 1975, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 35,7 x 35,7 cm.



Brian Merrett, Rue St-Mathieu, Montréal, 1975, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 35,7 x 35,7 cm.

identity is no longer about creating the portrait of the mythical *H. quebecensis* figure in a rural setting, but about setting the traditional underpinnings of that identity against the new urban conditions – the North American aspects of the city.

This shift can be observed in the 1960s in Michel Saint-Jean's *L'Amérique québécoise* (1963–73). Compared to well-known photographic essays of the period devoted wholly or partially to Montreal – say, Michel Régnier's *Montréal, Paris d'Amérique* (1961) and *Québec, une autre Amérique* (1970),<sup>24</sup> or Sam Tata's *Montréal* (1963)<sup>25</sup> – Saint-Jean's work stands out starkly thanks to its spirited design and the interest taken by the photographer in the city and its representation. If, after the fashion of Régnier's work, Saint-Jean's appears as a reflection on or affirmation of cultural identity at the level of nationhood, it nonetheless differs from it in many respects. Saint-Jean's problematizing of identity centres not so much on Québécois' dual allegiance to France and America as on the possible impacts of an increasingly industrialized city and the Americanization of urban culture. In contrast to Régnier's poetic vision and celebration of the universal values of the Quebec soul, the harmony of man with the forces of nature, and the immensity of backcountry spaces, Saint-Jean posits a more scathingly critical vision of Québécois "Américanité" that clashes with Régnier's lyricism.<sup>26</sup> The images of Québécois America, those of Montreal among others, in Saint-Jean afford a more dramatic view of the urban condition. Rather than being self-effacing before the subject, the "atmospheres of the urban environment," Saint-Jean prefers face-to-face confrontation: a direct gaze that refutes idealization and lays bare the paradoxes and absurdity of a culture rendered obsolete. In his images – photographs of working-class neighbourhoods, of urban rituals – the attention paid to the pro-



Brian Merrett, Rue Durocher, Montréal, 1976, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 35,7 x 35,7 cm.



Brian Merrett, Rue Drummond, Montréal, 1975, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 35,7 x 35,7 cm.



Brian Merrett, Complexe Desjardins, Montréal, 1975, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 35,7 x 35,7 cm.

liferation of advertising imagery and the automobile reveal the traces of a rapid transformation of urban culture driven by industrialization and the invasiveness of consumer society.<sup>27</sup> It would be going too far here to view Saint-Jean as a precursor, but one nonetheless discerns, in the distance separating him from Régnier, the direct gaze of an analyst, as well as some aspects characteristic (albeit via different modes) of the directional shift that was to assert itself in photography as the 1970s went on.

Although, in the importance that they ascribe to portraiture, projects such as Pierre Gaudard's *Les ouvriers* (1969–71), Claire Beaugrand-Champagne's *Les personnes âgées* (1972–74), and Alain Chagnon's *La taverne* (1972–74) reveal “family album” tropes (a favoured theme, in fact, of a specifically Québécois tradition, as Jongué has justly noted<sup>28</sup>), they are not limited to them. Via the specific spaces that they depict – rooming houses, family homes, factories, taverns – and their examination of living conditions in urban and industrial milieux, these projects are not so much a celebration of some mythic figure as a “reconstruction of the ordinarily lived.” Thus they are less the expression of the *H. quebecensis* myth, a purely nationalist viewpoint, than the affirmation of a political stance, a class-based viewpoint imbued with humanism. These portraits are no longer about the anonymity of the street. Portraiture, in Beaugrand-Champagne's and Gaudard's photographs of workers in their communities, quotes proper names: it personalizes the image.

In Serge Clément's work, the tension between the rural and the urban seen in Régnier's and Saint-Jean's reflections on Québécois identity is shifted toward that identity's confrontation with the metropolis and its North American dimensions. In *Affichage et automobile*, produced between 1975 and 1977, Clément



David Miller, Silo à céréale no. 2, vue sur la facade ouest, 1976, épreuve à la gélatine argentique virée au sélénium et à l'or, 24,4 x 19,4 cm.



David Miller, Silo à céréale no. 2, vue sur la facade est, 1976, épreuve à la gélatine argentique virée au sélénium et à l'or, 23,9 x 19,4 cm.



David Miller, Silo à céréale no. 1 et Rue de la Commune, 1976, épreuve à la gélatine argentique virée au sélénium et à l'or, 23,7 x 19,3 cm.

observed the impact of automobiles and advertising imagery on the urban grid. His interest at the time lay in the values and representations that these images conveyed in daily life.

When Michel Campeau mounted a show of his images of the 1970s under the banner *Week-End au "Paradis terrestre"!* (Weekend in "Earthly Paradise," 1973–80), the city appeared as a backdrop for urban rituals—sporting events, religious holidays, supermarkets, the park that he would linger in on Sundays. Campeau's photos interrogate, capture in time and space, these social behaviours ("hyper-styles," to use his own term) along with what they reveal about values and beliefs.

While the works of Clément and Campeau functioned as spaces for reflecting on the confrontation between Québécois identity and traditional values, on the one hand, and urban realities, on the other, other projects manifested an interest in the city and its distinct features, according to modes that also left room for a questioning of what it means to be "Québécois."

In the wake of projects and events such as Photo-Montréal and *Montréal Plus or Minus?* and the simultaneous growth of the grass-roots movement, a series of publications appeared, including *Montréal en évolution* (1974, by Jean-Claude Marsan, tracing the history of Montreal's urban and architectural development) and *Lost Montreal/Montréal perdu* (1975, by Luc d'Iberville-Moreau, a voluminously documented photographic evocation of the city's nineteenth-century architectural heritage). To be sure, these are personal statements informed by a certain nostalgia for the picturesque features of fast-fading Victorian Montreal, but all testify to the value of heritage architecture in collective memory and assert the presence of a (hi)story, of a tradition. *Mémoire de la rue*, one of the major components of



David Miller, Silo à céréale no. 1, vue arrière, 1979, épreuve à la gélatine argentique virée au sélénium et à l'or, 24,4 x 19,4 cm.



David Miller, Silo à céréale no. 1, hangar no. 4, quai, 1977, épreuve à la gélatine argentique virée au sélénium et à l'or, 19,4 x 24,4 cm.



David Miller, Silo à céréale no. 1, vue sur la facade ouest, 1976, épreuve à la gélatine argentique virée au sélénium et à l'or, 19,4 x 24,4 cm.



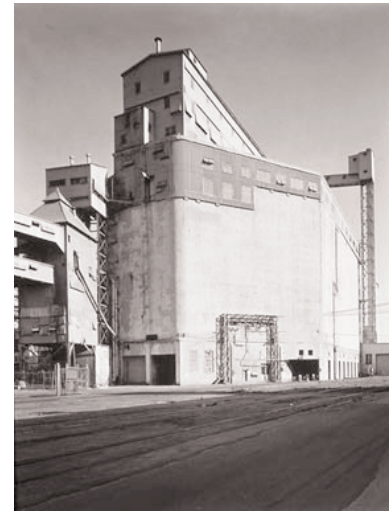
*Corridart* (1976), used archival and newspaper photographs to take up this reflection on the city, its spaces, and its architecture as vessels for social memory.<sup>29</sup>

Several other photographers expressed a similar interest in the city's distinct features. Brian Merrett's *Paysages urbains et environnements architecturaux* (1975–78) presents architecture as a factor in the quality of the environment and the relations of citizens, as persons on the street, to the urban space. Merrett's images of Montreal (like Clément's, incidentally) reveal an often caustic vision of the dehumanizing and "denaturalizing" effects of urban development.

Between 1977 and 1979, Gabor Szilasi, better known for his portraits and interiors, documented St. Catherine Street, the city's main downtown artery, from west to east. His interest in architecture is deployed via a specific focus on the façades delineating the street grid and the presence of signs and their lettering, which lend texture to the urban landscape. In this manner, Szilasi investigates the specific features of the street and its links to the Québécois and North American imagination.

In contrast to Szilasi, whose focus on architecture, façades, and signage is characterized by rigorous frontal depiction, David Miller, in his series of images produced in the Port of Montreal from 1975 to 1980, revels in the monumental appeal of Montreal heritage architecture, multiplying vantage points as he strives to convey the effect of buildings' mass and volume by studying their relationships to their immediate surroundings.

Clara Gutsche's *Windows* series (1976–81) reveals more than passing kinship with the artistic concerns of Michel Campeau. She is fascinated by window dis-



David Miller, Silo à céréales no. 1, vue sur la façade est, 1980, épreuve à la gélatine argentique virée au sélénium et à l'or, 24,4 x 19,3 cm.



Michel Saint-Jean, Pierre et Elisabeth, rue Notre Dame, Montréal, 1970, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 30,5 x 40,3 cm.



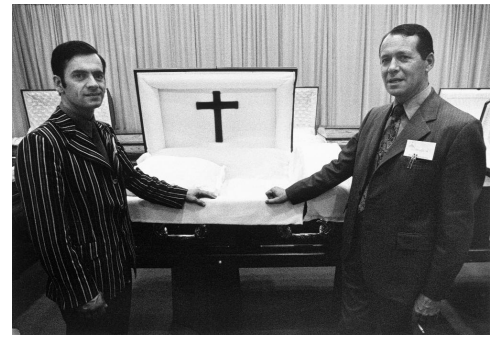
Michel Saint-Jean, Boulevard de Maisonneuve, Montréal, 1969, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 30,5 x 40,3 cm.

plays as objects of desire, as *mises en scène* of ready-made identities that she modernizes by modulating lighting effects.

Charles Gagnon stands alone. Though he does not, strictly speaking, belong to the social documentary tradition, he nevertheless advocates a direct approach in photography, using the city as a field of investigation. His images are the result of an indistinct conversation with the city, from which he culls moments of tension, ambiguities, contradictions. His interest in the urban landscape is worthy of attention not so much for what it reveals of a city's character as for the motifs explored: contrasts of materials and textures that he selects for their physical qualities, their sensuality, or the fact that, in their triviality, these features embody or reveal the passage of time, of human presence – which, paradoxically, is often absent.

\* \* \*

In offering this reflection on the modes by which a certain tradition operates in documentary photography in Quebec, I have sought to open up – or shatter, if you prefer – the frame within which that tradition was worded. In examining the works in the present exhibition, repeating the same scenario – that is, mechanically superimposing upon them a piece of history or interpreting photography practices in terms of ideologies – is not an option; we must consider the images in a new frame, drawn much wider. Viewed as part of an overall movement, treated thematically and synchronically, documentary photography in Quebec no longer appears as tightly bound up in a “nationalism” as monolithic as that which past discourses would have us believe. The history of photography is here presented as more fragmented, as a “quest for an identity” that takes many forms.



Michel Saint-Jean, Centre Paul Sauvé, Corporation des Directeurs de Funérailles, Montréal, 1971, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 30,5 x 40,3 cm.



Michel Saint-Jean, Rue Amherst, Montréal, 1970, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 40,3 x 30,5 cm.



Michel Saint-Jean, Rue Craig, Montréal, 1963, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 30,5 x 40,3 cm.

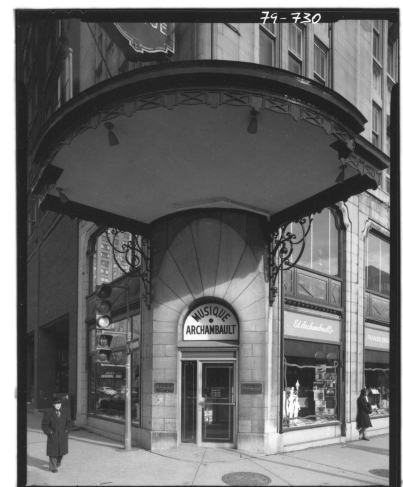
This in turn enables one to observe a diversity of attitudes and expose their differences and similarities, question them, study their interactions without simultaneously diminishing their particularities – in other words, to gauge both the differences and disconnects and the allegiances characterizing the diversity of issues addressed by Québécois documentary photography. Problematizing the subject in this way also enables renewed examination of what lies within the purview of “national tradition.” Thus, before proceeding any further with a reflection on the modes of this tradition and on the issues that it raises about identity, one should first consider the issues examined in Quebec photography of the period in question as belonging to a problematic of identity, “a problematized space for the clash of culture and identity.”<sup>30</sup>



Michel Saint-Jean, *Le Faubourg à la mélasse*, Montréal, 1963, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 30,5 x 40,3 cm.



Michel Saint-Jean, *Le Faubourg à la mélasse*, Montréal, 1963, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 30,5 x 40,3 cm.



Gabor Szilasi, *Le restaurant Texan*, 2219, Sainte-Catherine ouest, Montréal, 1979, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 35,5 x 28 cm.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sherry Simon, "Espaces incertains de la culture," in Sherry Simon, Pierre L'Hérault, Robert Schwertswald, and Alexis Nouss (eds.), *Fictions de l'identitaire au Québec* (Montreal: XYZ, Collection Études et documents, 1991), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Louise Abbott, "Une nouvelle tendance : les jeunes photographes canadiens," in *Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal 1991* [exhibition catalogue] (Montreal: Vox Populi, 1991), pp. 6–11.

<sup>3</sup> Gaëtan Gosselin, "Rêver les mirages," in *La traversée des mirages. Photographie du Québec* [exhibition catalogue] (Quebec City: VU centre d'animation et de diffusion, 1992), p. 10. Gosselin, writing about Quebec photography of the 1970s as "confined to an exclusively documentary usage," noted that it had at last shaken off these "shackles."

<sup>4</sup> Serge Jongué, "Le nouvel ordre photographique," in *Treize essais sur la photographie* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1990), pp. 37–54.

<sup>5</sup> The exhibition *Une tradition documentaire? Quelle tradition? Quel documentaire?* included works by Claire Beaugrand-Champagne, Michel Campeau, Alain Chagnon, Serge Clément, Charles Gagnon, Pierre Gaudard, Clara Gutsche, Brian Merrett, David Miller, Michel Saint-Jean, and Gabor Szilasi. Curated by Serge Allaire, it ran from September 7 to October 10, 1993, at the Maison de la culture Notre-Dame-de-Grâce during Mois de la Photo à Montréal 1993. It was also presented in 1996 at the Floating Gallery, Centre of Photography, Winnipeg, as part of *Light Year: A Festival of Photographies*.

<sup>6</sup> Gosselin, "Rêver," p. 7 (our translation).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9 (our translation).

<sup>8</sup> Simon, "Espaces," p. 16–17 (our translation).

<sup>9</sup> Gosselin, "Rêver," p. 9 (our translation).

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Toupin, "Le Québec en image," *La Presse*, Montréal, December 23, 1972, p. D-15 (our translation).

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Dessureault, "La photographie: un documentaire québécois des années 70," *Les expositions Flammarion de la Place des Arts*, June 5–July 29, 1979 (Montreal, 1979). With a few variations, Dessureault presented the same exposé of 1970s photography in 1988 at the symposium *Marques et contrastes*, held in Chicoutimi in November 1987 (proceedings published 1988). Pierre Dessureault, "Le documentaire entre l'expression et l'affirmation," *Marques et contrastes* (symposium proceedings) (Jonquière, Quebec: Éditions Sagamie–Québec, 1988), pp. 66–82 (our translation).

<sup>12</sup> Jongué, "Nouvel Ordre," pp. 42–43 (our translation).

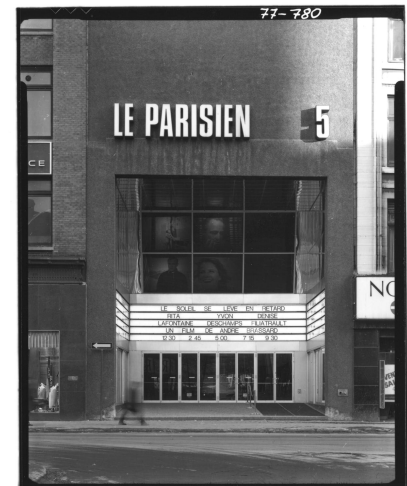
<sup>13</sup> As has often been observed, the practice of dividing art movements by decades is an ill-advised one, and the observation is particularly apt in this case. The decade of the 1970s extends and completes issues and problems emerging out of the 1960s – in several regards and to such an extent that it becomes practically impossible, if one wishes to be at all thorough in one's analysis, to discuss one decade without referring to the other.

<sup>14</sup> Other titles worthy of mention include the projects *Les gens de mon quartier* (My neighbourhood's people, 1972–74, by Roger Charbonneau) and *Parc Lafontaine* (1972–74, Serge Laurin); specific involvements by members of the GPP are also significant.

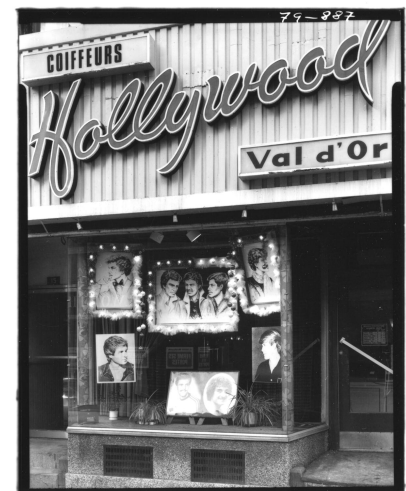
<sup>15</sup> Serge Jongué's remark that the years 1976 to 1980 were marked by a "documentary silence" is ambiguous: "In this sense, the documentary silence



Gabor Szilasi, King's Hall Building, 1231, Ste Catherine Ouest, Montréal, 1978, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 28 x 35,5 cm.



Gabor Szilasi, Le Parisien, Ste-Catherine ouest, Montréal, 1978, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 35,5 x 28 cm.



Gabor Szilasi, Coiffeurs Hollywood Val d'Or, 11, Ste-Catherine ouest, Montréal, 1979, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 35,5 x 28 cm.

that hung over the period spanning 1976 to 1980 seems to reveal a profound malaise punctuated both by the desertion of several practitioners (who turned toward more direct social intervention) and by the emergence of flagrant dissensions among the documentarists over strategies for the dissemination of photography (the OVO scandal)” (p. 41) (our translation).

In the history of documentary – which essentially centres on and is defined by the formation of the earliest groups of Francophone photographers – a paradoxical state of silence is observed during the years 1976–80. The remark surely refers to the desertion of practice by some Francophone photographers, but probably also to critical silence, since little attention was paid to documentary photography – after all, if one looks at the genre in terms of output, one can hardly speak of documentary “silence.” For proof one need look no further than the images presented here, which were produced during this period. And at the time, several of them were shown at Galerie Yajima.

<sup>16</sup> Jongué’s comment on the ascendancy of the hippie movement, “whose back-to-the-land doctrine was in step (marvellously so at the time) with nostalgia for a peasant Quebec that we know to be vaguely lost” (“Nouvel ordre,” p. 42) seems to me to be right on. This nostalgia, which defines a significant aspect of the Québécois identity, would evolve during the 1960 and 1970s.

<sup>17</sup> Louis Favreau, *Mouvement populaire et intervention communautaire, de 1960 à nos jours* (Montréal: Les Éditions du Fleuve, 1989).

<sup>18</sup> Some insight into the relationships among these grass-roots movements, feminism, the counter-culture, and photography may be gained from *Lâchés Lousses* (V.L.B, 1982) an anthology of documentary photography production by the new generation of 1970s photographers put together by Marie Chicoine, Louise de Grosbois, Evelyne de Foy, and Francine Poirier.

<sup>19</sup> “Photo-Montréal at Galerie Perception should make possible encounters, discussions, and exhibits as well as (since trends seem to be indicating it) a social utilization of photography—that is, not only to be witness to our times but to critically examine them.” From Pierre Gaudard, *Photo-Montréal-Intercommunication I* [typed copy, no pagination] (Centre de documentation BREAP),(our translation).

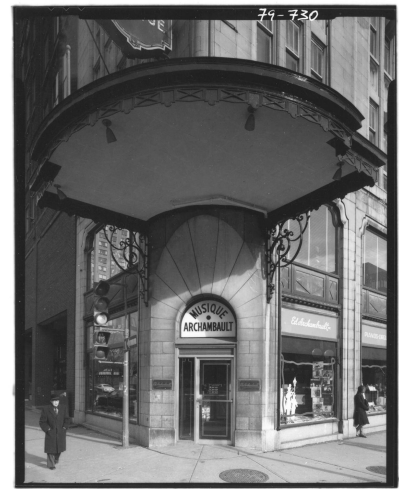
<sup>20</sup> Melvin Charney, “Introduction,” In Melvin Charney (ed.), *Montréal Plus or Minus?* [exhibition catalogue] (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1972), p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Charney, “Introduction,” p. 12.

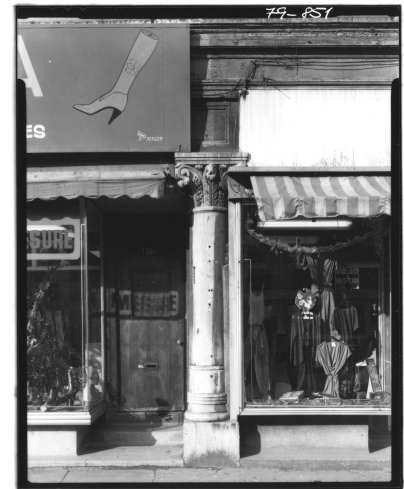
<sup>22</sup> Simon, “Espaces,” p. 17 (our translation).

<sup>23</sup> In this light, the introduction to *L’album de famille des québécois 1870–1970* (Éditions québécoises, 1970) is quite relevant: “In Québec we were ‘scattered’ for a long time. We no longer knew where we were from, who we were, what we belonged to. For the past ten years we’ve been trying to pick ourselves up. To remake our history we started by looking for real memories. [ . . . ] There’s a piece missing in the puzzle that is our country: we need to know what we’re like. From school, books, movies, TV, we knew more about France or the United States; we carried more of their names and faces around in our heads than the names of those who lived here before us. To rediscover images of ourselves, we went searching in individual families, where people have been collecting ‘portraits’ since photography’s inception, where people keep albums.” (our translation)

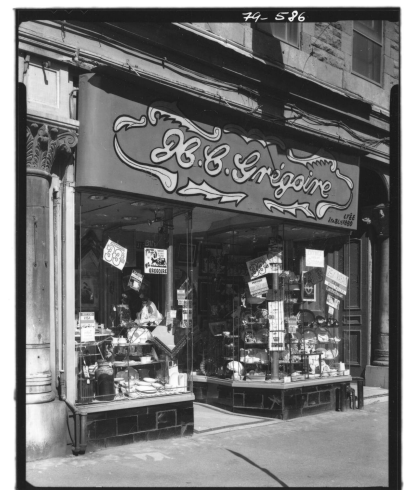
This relationship to mass culture was explored in a different frame by Michel Campeau, Maryse Pellerin, and André Sénécal in a comment on the direction and critical function of documentary during the 1970s: “In contrast to the role it plays in advertising, photography can be a powerful tool for social action – provided, of course, that its practitioners encourage investigation



Gabor Szilasi, *Musique Archambault*, 500, Ste-Catherine est, Montréal, 1978, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 35,5 x 28 cm.



Gabor Szilasi, *Bottes Mesures*, 1361, rue Ste-Catherine est, Montréal, 1979, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 35,5 x 28 cm.



Gabor Szilasi, *H.B. Grégoire Ltée*, 1311, rue Ste-Catherine est, Montréal, 1977, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 35,5 x 28 cm.

and know where they are coming from.” M. Campeau, M. Pellerin, and M. Senécal, “Pour une photographie progressiste au Québec,” *Le jour*, Montréal, March 6, 1976, p. 3-1 (our translation).

<sup>24</sup> Michel Régnier, *Montréal, Paris d'Amérique* [foreword by Félix Leclerc and Louis Dudek] (Montréal: Éditions du Jour inc., 1961); Michel Régnier. *Québec, une autre Amérique* (Quebec City: Éditeur officiel du Québec, 1970).

<sup>25</sup> Sam Tata and F. Lowe, *Montréal* (Toronto and Montreal: McClelland & Stewart, 1963).

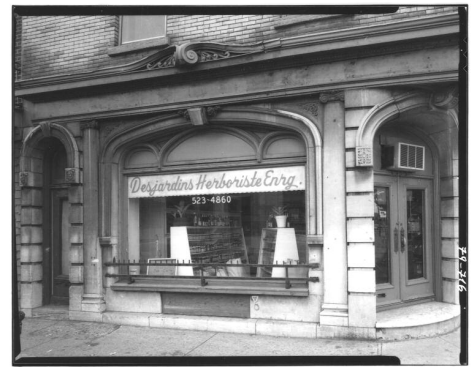
<sup>26</sup>The difference is no better defined in Victor-Lévy Beaulieu's comment associating Saint-Jean's pictures with the world of William Burroughs, while for Régnier they are connected to, among others, the writings of Félix Leclerc and Gilles Vigneault. “Like William Burroughs' cathedrals, Michel Saint-Jean's photographs explode in the air—image-exorcisms in the greasy fries of the Québécois dream.” Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, “Les images de Michel Saint-Jean,” *OVO Photo*, May-June 1975 (our translation).

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Régnier, in his introduction to *Québec, une autre Amérique*, emphasizes this transformation in the chosen representation of the identity of “*Homo quebecensis*”: “Francophone required to speak English in many daily activities, whom we have been too long content to depict as a rural individual, and who is a participant in one of the most important industrial booms of our time.” (our translation)

<sup>28</sup> Jongué, “Nouvel ordre,” p. 48.

<sup>29</sup> Serge Allaire, “Aspects de la censure au Québec – l'affaire Corridart,” *Parallélogramme*, February–March 1982, p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> Simon, “Espaces,” p. 26 (our translation).



Gabor Szilasi, Des jardins Herboristes Enr., 3303, Ste Catherine est, Montréal, 1979, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 28 x 35,5 cm.



Gabor Szilasi, Café Abitibi, 281, Ste-Catherine est, Montréal, 1979, épreuve à la gélatine argentique, 35,5 x 28 cm.