

Borduas – Then and Now¹ by Sam Abramovitch²

Fifty-five years is a relatively short period in terms of art years but sufficiently long enough for history to begin to assess the relative merits of a work of art. Too often art critics and museum curators are in a hurry to judge as to whether a work will pass the test of time but history, and history alone, is the final arbiter. For unlike political science where the victors write the history (which always turns out to be their version), art has a peculiar way of ignoring the subjective tastes and interests of the participants and is able to reach a general consensus.

All this is to suggest that in 1948, [Paul-Emile Borduas](#), then a little-known painter on the international scene, living in the Province of Quebec, Canada, together with sixteen friends and students, proclaimed publicly a new era in terms of art and social attitudes by publishing a manifesto that they called [Refus global](#). Unknown to them, similar groups had arisen in other parts of the world, as examples the [Abstract Expressionists](#) in the United States and the [Cobra Group](#) in Europe. But the difference between the Automatistes, as the Quebec group became known, and the others was the inclusion of the social in their aesthetics.³ However that is not to say that the Automatistes put slogans in their paintings or created “social art” to express their opposition to the dominant ideology which existed at that time. Rather, as artists they thought that the aesthetic would help liberate society. One is almost tempted to describe them as associated with Theodor Adorno who argued that high art will have a liberating effect on the viewer; this idea is articulated in his book *The Aesthetic Theory*⁴ written after he partially abandoned his orthodox Marxism and examined other avenues whereby the exploited workers would develop a self-consciousness, thus making them aware of their position in society and consequently creating a desire to change it.

During the years leading up to the 1940's and early 1950's, the Province of Quebec was relatively isolated from the main centers of avant-garde art and libertarian ideologies. (I use the term libertarian in the meaning given to it at that period and not in its present sense, where it is used by a wide spectrum of ideologies from the left to the right.) It is thus remarkable that this small group of individuals could produce a text that announced a total rejection of the dominant ideology of the period and was an outcry for complete individual liberty. Undoubtedly, today's readers could judge the document somewhat naïve and dated, but it is important to situate it in the historical context of when it was written and of the political and cultural climate of that period, and with that as a perspective, it would thus then take on a different allure.

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² [ed. note: Sam Abramovitch is an independent scholar and a long-time friend to the Automatistes and other radicals in Québec and beyond. I have lightly edited his words, but kept the engaging and talkative prose he employs, and have suggested a few links for those unfamiliar with the scene he is describing here].

³ The easy explanation for this was the fact that the Catholic Church dominated Quebec both politically and culturally for very many years leading up to that period.

⁴ Adorno T. W. *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1984)

The group's vocal expression of their discomfort with the existing authoritative political ideology was rather short-lived. One can state without any hesitation that this group as a homogeneous unit had disappeared by 1953, and its members by then had wandered off in pursuit of their respective careers, mostly related to the art world. But their place is assured in the art and social history of Canada.

The itinerary of Borduas, after leaving Canada in 1953, took him to New York City and then to Paris where he died in 1960 at the age of 55. He had hoped to continue on to Tokyo and then return to his home in St. Hilaire where he thought that he would spend the rest of his years and be buried. His remains were eventually transported from Paris to St. Hilaire in 1988, after considerable difficulties.

Let us examine the political and social environment that existed when Borduas and his friends burst on the scene and made their presence known – much to the consternation of the “respectable” population in the Province of Quebec. It might be hard today, living in the Western world, to imagine the type of society that the majority of the population, mostly francophone, endured. The only schools available to children at that time were run by a very orthodox Roman Catholic Church, and classes were taught by the religious clergy with all that this entails, notably obligatory prayers, a choice of subjects which was restricted in accordance with the dogma of Catholicism, overhanging threats of sinning, strict censorship of reading material, separation of the sexes, and so forth. Indeed this climate was not restricted to the schools it also extended to the home, family life and workplace. Sunday was church day, Friday was fish or non-meat day and every Catholic holiday was strictly observed. A regular visit to a confessional chamber at the Church was obligatory, and therein one had to recount one's sins and sinful thoughts to a priest. The political life was not exempt of this influence since a political party called the [Union Nationale](#), that shared the same ideology as the Catholic Church, ran the Government of Quebec in a strict authoritarian manner. A Board of Censors scrutinized films prior to their being shown, resulting in the censorship of works such as *Les Enfants du Paradis* by Marcel Carne, and it prohibited the use of NFB films in Quebec schools because it wanted to keep federal presence to a minimum and was convinced that NFB employees had communist affiliations.

Libraries and bookstores did not escape their watchful eye to the extent that a Padlock Law existed, which allowed the police, at their own discretion, to padlock any location which they deemed to contain “communist” books, magazines, leaflets, etc. This was no idle threat but actually occurred, much to the anger of anybody liberal and further left. Fortunately a team of prominent constitutional lawyers including Manuel Schacter and [Frank Scott](#) came to the rescue, successfully pleading to overturn this practice before the Supreme Court of Canada. Strangely enough, the decision was based on the fact that the Provincial Government has no jurisdiction on these matters, which presumably might also mean that only the Federal authorities have the power to legislate on these concerns, a power which fortunately they never enforced; nevertheless, this could be deemed a legal victory for freedom of expression for all Canadians.

With this as a background, there is little wonder that a stirring and an awakening were due to erupt in Québec, especially among the student francophone population (the English-speaking population did not have the Catholic Church to contend with, and hence had fewer restrictions). They heard rumors circulating and some information quite literally ‘found its way’ to Quebec of the goings on in France, mainly dealing with André

Breton and the [Surrealists](#), all of which gave them hope for their own future. Their knowledge as to social and cultural activities in the USA was even more limited, essentially because of the language barrier, and the ban on any controversial literature entering the country. But leftist and nationalist groups gradually began to have their voices heard usually directed towards a support of the trade union movements and the anti-conscription feelings associated with the outbreak of the Second World War.

Borduas began teaching art in 1935 at L'Ecole du meuble, a school in Montreal, where he first made contact with the younger generation and colleagues who would eventually team up with him to form the dynamic but short-lived Automatiste group. He was already painting very seriously, and in 1942 had his first Montreal show, which was quite successful, at least in terms of sales. During this period, until he was forced to leave his teaching position in 1948,⁵ the activities of Borduas were beginning to be felt and emulated by a few but heard by many. The thrust at the outset was mainly in the domain of art and its condition in Montreal to which they reacted, including the established players who were generally opposed to any attempt of new expressions such as non-figurative paintings. The feud was with the official art associations, museums and art galleries. They then added their political concerns and this combination, in varying degrees, shook up the Montreal and the Quebec community. All this was quite inevitable and to further affirm their differences, their vocabulary included categorizing themselves as revolutionaries against their opponents being termed reactionaries.

In August 1948 the bombshell *Refus global* was launched on Montreal but only one bookstore dared to present it to the public which, one can say, helped rather than hindered its popular appearance and journalist coverage. There was a limited number of copies printed (400), and for a publication that dared to publicly proclaim its opposition to the official cultural and political ideology, the fact that the “respectable” bookstores shunned its presence on their premises gave it more force as a manifesto and added to its reputation. The group spared no one in its vehement dismissal of those opinions that it considered reactionary, including the Catholic Church and its schools, the existing political parties including the so-called left (the Communist Party), Marxism (confusing the misuse of the term Marxism by the totalitarian left with the writings of Marx), the art associations, galleries and museums that would not recognize their “revolutionary” art. Their manifesto denounced “l'intention, arme nefaste de la raison” to be replaced by “la magie, les mysteres objectifs, l'amour et les necessites”, in other words “l'anarchie resplendissante”.⁶ A brief summary of the ideas presented therein is encapsulated in the idea that spontaneity should reign supreme.

One must acknowledge that the *Refus global* is not a profound analysis of society, nor did it intend to be, but rather a manifesto proclaiming these artists' newfound attitudes. It is important to recall that the 1940's and 1950's were inundated with pamphlets and posters that tried, through this method, to expose the public to a different set of ideas; but what was different and unique in the case of the Automatistes was their appearance as artists who challenged the political and social elite, as opposed to those who came from strictly political and student groups, and who stuck to their own agenda. The theories and writings of Sigmund Freud had made their way into Quebec by then,

⁵ The determining factors for his dismissal were his public social, political and cultural statements.

⁶ *Refus global*, (1948)

and the idea of the subconscious would fit nicely in helping the Automatistes explain their thinking and their paintings.

Between the period of 1948 and 1953, Borduas and his group were quite active in Montreal and increasingly made their presence known. As essentially a group of artists, their main preoccupation was with culture, and centered on organizing exhibitions of their art, which admittedly was new for Montreal, trying to have their art accepted by the “reactionary” museums and art galleries, organizing protest marches to proclaim their “revolutionary” positions, and just refusing to lie down and be silent. They organized with some outsiders a discussion group, but this petered out after a few sessions. Political parties and groups including liberals, social democrats, communists, Trotskyites, nationalists, anarchists and a few other sectarians groups tried to befriend them to gain advantage from their burgeoning popularity. Although they were small in numbers, their support was sought as a means of garnering the means to translate it into a victory, if only purely symbolic. Generally, the automatistes refused to be associated with any group that they considered bourgeois or totalitarian, and hence felt more at home with the anarchists. But this did not prevail for very long, and as the group started to disintegrate, each of them going off in various directions, some adherents lost interest in strictly political issues.

The Automatistes were by this point becoming successful in organizing their art exhibitions, and, being increasing vocal on the public scene, this further expanded their prominence. Their reception by the Montreal public and the art community was rather limited, -- much to their displeasure -- but although figurative and landscape painting remained more acceptable to the public, their influence was felt nevertheless in terms of varied cultural activities. Small theatre and dance groups sprang up in their image, as did poets galore, all quite exciting, but this did not fully satisfy their desire and ambition as artists. They aspired to a greater horizon and those that could afford it, and some who could not, decided to take the risk of leaving the confines of Montreal for the usual Paris or New York.

In the spring of 1953, Borduas moved to Provincetown on the way to New York City with the goal of establishing himself as a known and respected international painter. He was convinced, and rightly so, that by residing in Montreal he could not achieve that, and the sooner he made the move, the better his chances for success. It should be pointed out he had previously made inquiries about relocating to Paris and New York, but he had been discouraged by the advice he received from people living in both those cities. Unlike one popular myth, the reason for Borduas leaving his birthplace was his need to establish himself as a world-class painter, and not his loss of employment (in 1948) or his having been “rejected” in the Province of Quebec.

This was a bold and courageous move for Borduas. He decided to spend the summer in Provincetown, and then the plan was to move on to New York. Provincetown, primarily a summer resort town for residents of Boston and New York, was also a popular destination for artists to congregate in order to escape from their hot and humid studios in the big cities. Borduas’ English was extremely limited, but he succeeded in finding a decent studio for his work, and he immediately got down to the task of painting. When I visited him in July 1953, I was the first person with whom he could have a conversation; his only other contact was with someone who worked in the store where he bought his food and other supplies, but with him Borduas was limited to sign and hand

language. He was really either ill-informed, or was unaware of the art world in New York, primarily with respect to the questions of which painters who were hot, and which passé. The German painter Hans Hofmann had moved to the USA and was running an art school in Provincetown at that time, which was highly reputed and very well respected. Borduas concluded, incorrectly, that Hoffman was the “competition,” and that he would have to challenge him as a means to establishing his own place in New York. There was no mention of Pollock, Kline, De Kooning and others who were attracting all the attention during that period.⁷

Borduas did not know Clement Greenberg personally, but he was acquainted with his reputation as the eminent and well-respected dean of the American art critics. He was awaiting and hoping for a visit from Greenberg, as well as from the director of a prestigious New York avant-garde art gallery, for the area did attract the New York and Boston art elite. The months that he lived in Provincetown were indeed lonely, but nothing could deter him from continuing to paint and dream of all that he hoped to accomplish. His paintings began to show an influence of the ocean and the sand, but no influence from the abstract expressionist American painters. He still maintained contact with some of the “group” in Montréal, but the topics they discussed centered increasingly on art, rather societal problems or social issues.

In September 1953, Borduas packed his bags, his canvases and his art material and moved to New York City, where he settled in a space close to Greenwich Village which was quite respectable and adequate for his living and painting needs. Here again he did not know a soul, and his English showed no signs of improvement. When I saw him after he had settled in, he still did not know his way around the city, and had not made any contacts. This meeting reminded me of when I had first met Borduas, after his group had first contacted me in Montreal. He was then living in St. Hilaire, a tiny village near Montreal, and when I arrived he was busy watering his flower garden, projecting an image that was not all in keeping with what he portrayed in Montreal as the “revolutionary” fighting the “reactionaries.” He had just received a postcard from [Jean-Paul Riopelle](#) who was living in Paris at that time and the post card contained a photo of a painting that Riopelle had recently done. To my surprise and amazement Borduas dismissed the painting; I could not fathom why, for it was close to the New York school and very much part of the avant-garde. The only explanation I could offer myself was that he was unfamiliar with what was going on in the USA avant-garde scene.

His loneliness suggested to me that he should go to the Cedar Bar in the Village, which was the hangout of the artists, and the chances were good that he would find someone who could converse with him in French. I also gave him the address of a friend who unfortunately spoke English with a heavy German accent, which also did not help the situation. What surprised me was that he still had not made the round of the galleries or the museums so as to become acquainted with the New York art scene. I remember bringing him some catalogues of exhibitions that I had seen and which were later found among his papers but there should be no presumption that he had actually seen these shows.

⁷ This is not meant to dismiss Hofmann who was an excellent painter and also the teacher of many who became important and famous, but for Hofmann, it was necessary to await his death before his full public recognition was established. Of course the inner circle of artists and critics were well aware of his talent long before his death.

Eventually he did visit some galleries and did make some contacts, was successful in having an exhibition at a New York gallery and placed some paintings at another gallery, both well-established at that time, but his stay in New York was difficult and lonely, not helped by the fact that he had his sick daughter with him for part of the time. His interaction with the other artists was also very difficult, what with a communication problem, personality differences and style of living. In New York, he was no longer the revolutionary in feud with the reactionaries. It was a new ball game with all the difficulties of establishing a place in the difficult and competitive New York art scene that is not easy, unless one arrives as a known international star. In the end his stay in that city marked a change in his painting influenced by the works of Franz Kline, among others, but he did not achieve the goal he desired and decided to move on, which in fact was his original plan.

Borduas and his daughter departed by ship for Paris in 1955 on the *Liberté*. My last face-to-face conversation with him was when I accompanied him to see him board that large ship on its way to France. It was not a sad farewell, for he was quite optimistic about his future in Paris where he had many friends and acquaintances and, of course, where the language and the customs were more familiar to him. But his arrival did not fill him with joy; he was unhappy with the studio that his friends had found for him, and although he did relocate, he could not duplicate his spacious and bright New York studio. He was also more comfortable with the physical appearance of New Yorkers and what he saw as their alleged optimism in contrast to that of the Parisians. Was a bit of nostalgia creeping in? He seemed to have more contact with New York living in Paris than when he actually lived in the former. This seemed to be in keeping with a conversation I had with Borduas about his itinerary. He spoke of going to New York to enhance his reputation in Montreal, to Paris to help him in New York, and similarly to Tokyo for Paris. Despite all of these obstacles, he did settle in, and painted almost constantly, and he took time to meet friends who lived or visited Paris, and to make contact with galleries and art dealers, all of which was somewhat fruitful. He persevered in spite of any difficulty that he encountered, for he was convinced that his talent would be recognized. All of this was beginning to occur when unfortunately he died, before he could witness this development.

Borduas was buried in a cemetery in Paris, but after thirty years there was a threat that his remains would be transferred to a common grave by the French authorities. When an old colleague became aware of this possibility, a committee of three was organized to circumvent this from happening. We were well up to task when I received a telephone call from the office of the Provincial Minister of Culture requesting a meeting to discuss this matter. The crux was that the government was ready to be involved and proposed the idea of Borduas' remains being buried at the Place des Arts. (Strange indeed, was the intention to establish a Montreal Westminster Abbey?) We, on the other hand, insisted in respecting the wishes of Borduas to have him buried in his native St. Hilaire and were prepared to ignore the government's aid and involvement. They conceded and the Minister of Culture was present at the services and the burial that occurred at the Catholic Church and its cemetery. There was really no option in terms of the burial site and no one considered it a compromise. Nonetheless, of the few remaining Automatists still living in Montreal, only one was in attendance. Presumably the event occurring in the Catholic Church discouraged the presence of the others.

It could be too easy but also unjust to be critical of Borduas and his friends for having put aside the social attitudes expressed in *Refus global* and concentrate on their art. Clement Greenberg, when he was still a Marxist, described the artistic avant-garde as tied to the capitalist class “by an umbilical cord of gold” while naming its mass-cultural opposite as “kitsch.”⁸ Artists may aspire to produce what Adorno called autonomous art, that is free from the influence of the market place, but they do have to pay their rent and feed themselves and are thus tied in varying degrees to the society, even if they might like to see it changed. Throughout history it was the ruling class that was the support of the artists, a situation that still persists to this day. They are the ones that buy the art and display it in their offices or homes even though the art may, at times, be social and critical of the status quo and definitely not reflecting the values of the acquirers. It is ironic that this so-called “revolutionary” art becomes the official art of the bourgeoisie. Society has a talent of absorbing its critics and make them part and parcel of the dominant ideology. Democracy does need an opposition for it to appear as a democratic state and some art does help play that role, probably unconsciously on the part of the artists.

The art of Borduas is situated in the modernist tradition, a movement that had its roots in attitudes of the Enlightenment, that is, progress and change. When the *Refus global* first appeared, modernism was already well entrenched in most parts of the Western World and in fact the crisis of modernity was beginning to be felt and its progressive character was being questioned, especially in the academia. In the Province of Quebec there was no shortage of modernist painters when the Automatistes made their appearance, but the latter added the dimension of the social and political. The other artists were already entrenched in the museums and galleries who rejected the abstract art of the newcomers and were thus categorized as “reactionaries” in contrast to them as the “revolutionaries.” When Borduas left his home province for New York, he became aware that their 1948 manifesto, although revolutionary for Quebec at that period, was already passé elsewhere and he reacted accordingly. Based on this realization that he discovered after moving to New York, he regarded his Montreal colleagues’ preoccupations as retrograde, and had difficulty maintaining his association with their pronouncements. This expressed itself not in Borduas’ paintings, but in his cultural and social statements.

The 1950’s and 1960’s saw the beginnings of the crisis of modernity and the growth of what was later dubbed post-modern art,⁹ a term that compensates in its descriptiveness for its lack of inventiveness. Its appearance coincided with the emergence of a consumer society and multinational capitalism. As in the case of modernism that was based on specific historic conditions, it should not be surprising that changes should occur and for culture to take on a different aspect. When high modernism began to be taught in schools, it became a sure sign that it was being emptied of any subversive influence. The claim of post-modernism was to deconstruct modernism in order to resist the status quo. This attitude had many supporters including others they co-opted such as

⁸ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-garde and kitsch” in *Art and Culture* (1961)

⁹ I am using the term with the meaning given it by Terry Eagleton in *After Theory* (Allen Lane 2003) “By ‘postmodern’, I mean, roughly speaking, the contemporary movement of thought which rejects totalities, universal values, grand historical narratives, solid foundations to human existence and the possibility of objective knowledge. Postmodernism is skeptical of truth, unity and progress, opposes what it sees as elitism in culture, tends towards cultural relativism....”

the famous article of Walter Benjamin “*The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*”¹⁰ in which Benjamin presented the idea that reproductions would remove the aura from art. But modern photography, as well as most of post-modernism, has taken on the same aura as its predecessor. The same pattern seems to be repeating itself but without the reference to the aesthetic, in fact it appears to be an aesthetic of anti-aesthetics.

Much of the modern thinking on aesthetics can be traced to the thoughts of Immanuel Kant on this subject and who in turn influenced, among others, Theodor Adorno and, later on, Clement Greenberg. This position places the significance of art in its autonomy and for both Adorno and Greenberg it is the emphasis on the aesthetic that can keep art apart from a market-oriented culture. Although as Meyer Schapiro suggested “the pretended autonomy and absoluteness of the aesthetic was a myth but rather art is shaped by experience and nonaesthetic concerns”¹¹ might qualify the above without rejecting it completely. Hal Foster in the book that he edited and wrote the introduction, *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*¹², argues that modernism’s failure was the desire for the aesthetic to continue to play a subversive role, but that was of no avail as the capitalist culture proved to be too powerful and in turn absorbed modernism as its official culture. It appears to Foster that art must abandon its autonomy and the aesthetic to become oppositional and political. However, it is quite apparent that the dominant ideology has absorbed postmodernism and the latter has also experienced the same fate and became part of the official culture of society.

Where does all this leave us with reference to a discussion on Borduas? The art of Borduas is situated in the large category of modernism, but unlike most of the avant-garde, who made their appearance in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s, Borduas and his group were overtly political in their pronouncements. As a matter of fact, even in their discussions of art they used political terms such as “revolutionary,” “anarchism” and “reactionary”. However, when 1953 rolled around these terms disappeared as political terms from the vocabulary of Borduas and when “freedom” was used it was in reference to the subconscious in the Freudian sense of the term. It should be pointed out that a reading of *Refus global* would indicate that it made no attempt at a profound analysis of society, but rather limited itself to an outcry against the injustices of society and its resulting suffocation of the population. There is no dispute that the effect was felt and was generally positive. But the importance of Borduas is in his art and the manner in which he (may I use that word?) revolutionized art in Quebec. His desire was for art to be spontaneous and free of the academic rules of the past. There was to be no preconceived ideas, no imitation of the external world, and for the subconscious to give birth to the “mysteres objectifs”¹³. Art in the Province of Quebec was never the same after that,

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, in *Illuminations*, (Schochen, 1969)

¹¹ Meyer Schapiro, *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries. Selected Papers* (George Braziller, 1978)

¹² Hal Foster, editor, *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, (Bay Press, 1983)

¹³ *Refus global* (1948)

albeit even though it did not necessarily follow in these footsteps, it was a complete break with the past and allowed for the opening of new horizons.

To be sure, art in Quebec followed the same trajectory as in many other parts of the globe with the appearance of various post-'s replacing modernism and all that this implied. But does this suggest that Borduas can only be considered as an historical figure with no real relevance to what is being created today? My short answer to that question is: no. It might very well be a worthwhile exercise to rethink what influence art can have, if any, in the present-day world in view of the failure of both modern and post-modern art to effectively withstand the power of the dominant ideology in contemporary society.

Irrespective of the subjective wishes of the artists, the art leaving the studio lives in a world independent of the social attitudes of the creator and is subject to the rules of the market place over which the artists have no control. Perhaps there are still some artists around who think that their art can change the world but there is little or no chance of this happening, for the social power of culture is rather limited. Of course art is still looked at, to be admired or disliked, found vulgar or sublime, challenging and/or disturbing, interesting or boring, hopefully for its quality as a work of art and not its use-value, which includes its desire to "change the world." Recognizing this limitation should not cause the artists to enter a state of discouragement, but rather can act as an inspiration for them to broaden their activity. In any case, a political message in a work of art has become less and less a concern of the artists, and is practically confined to the domain of many art historians and the academia who still persist to comment on the social-cultural-political aspect of the work that they are observing.

I would propose that it would be more beneficial to regard the paintings of Borduas as works of art per se, without associating them to his automatist past, if that is indeed a temptation. To be sure, works of art belong to their period and place and are viewed as historically specific. But the paintings of Borduas do transcend the recent period of the various post-'s and help to indicate a proper place of art in society.