

Hippo Holes

An essay on Jérôme Saint-Loubert Bié's Untitled by Jim Ovelmen

London cabbies supposedly have unusually large hippocampuses, the part of the brain dealing with navigation and spacial memory. To master labyrinthine routes and complex combinations, orientation must be realized instantly. My immediate reaction to Untitled, by Jérôme Saint-Loubert Bié, was that it seemed like a video game ("escape from the gallery"), exercising the part of the hippocampus that has stored our movements through institutional art spaces. Yet if this were so, it would be a game that has no clear goal or destination.

Upon entering the virtual gallery, we have the opportunity to pick from an array of cartoon-like compositions in which we may advance in a simulated perspective. Yet when we arrive at our destination, our field of vision is replaced by a room with at least four more choices. What we see in each composition seems to reflect the same room in which we stand, as seen from different points of view, as if each structure is simply a mirror. However, each composition has its own color family, which seems to suggest that what we are seeing may be in fact, other rooms. And incidentally, our new room precisely matches the composition of the picture we last clicked. In this fresh room there is at least one composition on the wall that matches the room that we just left. If we continue pursuing this picture we participate in an infinite loop. We may choose a different composition, but the cycle is similar. Instead of calling them compositions it is more effective to refer to them windows or holes. When we choose one of them, they cease to be either structures or mirrors, but rather holes deferring to other holes. We may begin to believe that the color schemes are a kind of generic coding for the walls and floors. Or we may think in reverse; the walls and floors are coded vehicles for seeing the pictures.

It seems too obvious to perceive the piece as an endless exchange of models between art and architecture. Unlike the heavily metaphoric, conduit compositions of Peter Halley, Saint-Loubert Bié's constructions are partly in motion. His lines are composed, yet they are a map to both hide and activate other representations. A hall-of-mirrors is frequently evoked in Saint-Loubert Bié's projects, which generate referential feedback loops. In previous work he has systematically incorporated the elements and materials that document an exhibition, as an exhibition. He has used the gallery's own archives in his work including others artists' slides, museum catalogues, and documentation photos, entangling numerous voices of ownership. There is a chain of referents presented that have components deeply embedded in issues of representation and authorship. In his recent line drawing projects, these challenging conceptual concerns become re-encoded into a visual network. The first example of this is *Traverses*, a web-based piece done for the Pompidou Center in Paris. In *Traverses*, nineteen exhibition photographs were traced. The closed-off lines representing hanging artworks double as holes that allow us to peer into other rooms. The other rooms are tracings of installations in different locations, by different artists. This worm-holing of surfaces both advances and complicates the perception of the gallery as pure facade and interface of the experience of art.

In his drawings, Saint-Loubert Bié makes marks that seem to adhere mechanically to the photograph, but give the matter-of-fact seams and corners signifying a gallery.

Because of the interdependency of lines, *Traverses* has the distressing logic of the maze. Rosalind Krauss might have called this the complex (1). For example, Japanese gardens, ritual playing fields, labyrinths and mazes are both landscape and architecture, and occupy the realm of the complex.

The complex is visited again in Saint-Loubert Bié's *Untitled*. It is difficult if not impossible to illustrate what this virtual gallery would look like from an aerial view. Our point of access into the facades is from a pedestrian perspective and our choices are sequential. Although we may "exit" the gallery if we wish, and enter what appears to be another gallery echoing the one we have just left, we can not leave the trail or go backward. Although it appears we are enclosed by architecture, actually we are enclosed by symmetry. There is an illusion of inward motion each time we advance into our choices. We only move outward, like traveling on the surface of a mobius strip. Although these terms are trying to describe a dimension that is at the start simulated, issues of the real could be raised. We often experience and think about art as would-be eye witnesses, spying upon magazines, books and catalogues. It seems in *Untitled*, we participate in a pre-realized, interactive endgame -where the virtual walk-through is the final experience. Saint-Loubert Bié creates a complex of art institutions which become a denuded menu of corporate-recognized artists, artwork and gallery locations. By making surfaces holes, and holes surfaces, he constructs a chain of images that cannot be navigated. In this work, there is a kind of dizziness felt, which is similar to a marathon art viewing experience. His piece seems to toy with the illusion of escape while underscoring claustrophobic surfaces that enclose, define and delineate an exhibition.

1. From the essay *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, by Rosalind Krauss
The Anti-Aesthetic, edited by Hal Foster, 1983