

Porous Borders, Fragile Structures and Chance Encounters: Performative Trajectories and the Importance of the Immaterial in the *VVV Transfrontier Odyssey Trilogy*

By Victoria Stanton

* A french version of this text has been published in *Inter art actuel* magazine no.118.

(Im)materializing

The first time I met Patrick, he picked me up in a battered blue Ford Ranger, a compact, 1980s era pick-up truck. An 80s kid, feeling quite at home, I got into the passenger seat and looked around, impressed. “This is the Blue Rider,” he told me. We pulled out of the gas station parking lot, Patrick having to manually manipulate the signal, moving the arm up and down to indicate to the driver behind us that we would in fact be momentarily turning left.

Then I noticed the contents of his glove compartment. I could see them because the door had busted off some time earlier, some time before I met Patrick and his blue pick-up truck. The exposed compartment had become a mini museum, and sitting discreetly among a variety of what I could immediately tell were a selection of specific ritual objects was a book: *Walking*, by Henry D. Thoreau. The French translation actually, *La Marche*.

The title was already on the tip of my tongue, another colleague had recommended it only days before. “Have you read it yet?” I asked Patrick.

“Only excerpts. It’s there in case the truck breaks down.”

Patrick Beaulieu is a consummate adventurer. An urban cowboy. A cultivated contemporary dandy – living out in the woods. A modern-day Thoreau himself, this Quebecois creator is passionate about Canadian canoeing, Mexican folk culture, and American backroads. And Patrick has a history of driving vintage vehicles, specifically, dilapidated trucks. Yes, they get him from point A to point B, but more

importantly, they are a key component in the conception, construction and completion of his site-specific, socially-based, geopoetic journeys.

A multidisciplinary artist whose work has been shown internationally, for the last seven years Patrick Beaulieu has developed a series of interconnected pieces, an epic trilogy in motion that has seen him following the evanescent migration of butterflies, the intangible currents of the wind and the mysterious trajectories of fate.

Each project he initiates is its own multi-faceted, highly stylized and elaborate production; “filmic” photo-installation works for a fictionalized real-time expedition. The (art) frame, however, is always slightly out of focus: a loose fit, unobtrusively present, barely apparent. And this almost nonappearance leaves ample room for sumptuous, and necessary, ambiguity, shape-shifting effortlessly in the liminal and porous boundary between art and life.

Vector Monarca (The Road of the Soul) was the first of the series. In 2007, for 34 days in the month of October (a poetic overlap of October into November)¹ Patrick, along with author / filmmaker Daniel Canty, boarded a disused Canada Post truck, an old Grumman LLV brought to life in 1978, but since put out of commission. Refurbished with a few new parts and a coat of white paint, the “Monarca Mobile” was transformed into an art gallery, outdoor projection screen and quasi science lab on wheels. Endeavouring to follow the migratory path of the monarch butterfly, the two started their journey in Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, Quebec, then traveled across the U.S. finally reaching the migratory sanctuary of the monarch in the mountains of Michoacán, Mexico.

Ventury followed suite and in 2010, over November and December, Patrick, was accompanied relay style by Daniel Canty (again), landscape architect Alexis Pernet, and poet Dauphin Vincent. With one co-pilot at a time, Patrick took a 25-day trip into the States, beginning in Chicago (The Windy City), this time attempting to track the movements of discernible terrestrial winds. As with the “Monarca Mobile,” the Blue

¹ “I borrow the term from Boris Vian, as a part of the novel, *L’arrache-cœur* (1953) takes place in the fictional month of Octobre. I take advantage of the relative non-existence of this month to make it last thirty-four days.” Daniel Canty in *Trente-quatre d’octobre - Le Vecteur monarque*.

Rider was tailored to the needs of this particular road-trip: a roof-top weathervane, windsock and pinwheel were affixed to the vehicle in order to guide the explorers and point them in the right direction.

Vegas completed the trilogy when, in July 2012, Patrick and his steadfast partner Daniel decided to reflect upon the phenomenon of fate. In a hands-on 21-day-long escapade of chance, they sojourned in the “Magic Dart,” a 1968 Dodge bought in Las Vegas that had had a makeover of its own. This time the vehicle sported a Wheel of Fortune on the car’s ample hood – a device that was used to attract seasoned and would-be gamblers alike. The ambulatory event combined spontaneous public encounters and slightly calculated meetings with all manner of “fortune-teller,” to formulate an investigation into how one creates and responds to luck. One spin of the wheel on each of the 21 days determined the “theme” (or intention) of the day: contemplation, punishment, innocence, the unfathomable...

Although each project’s ultimate destination manifested in some material form of installation, the immaterial, lesser-visible and in-between zones of Patrick’s process are what decisively define his overall practice. His work is a living meditation, a self-conscious interpolation into discreet and wide-open spaces that he navigates by way of four wheels and a co-pilot. More than just a road trip, these *transfrontier odysseys* (as Patrick refers to his projects) are concentrated observations – not only of nebulous natural phenomena but of the imperceptible life force; all that may spontaneously occur and unexpectedly shift our perception – even direction – in those wide open spaces of the backroads and highways, and equally importantly, of the mind. It is within this terrain of trust (in the present moment), that Patrick’s explorations take root. The open road (and mind) becomes the interstitial site for performative demonstrations of intuition, necessity, and serendipity. And within this performative attitude, there flourishes his attentive consideration of an evanescent present – how porous borders, fragile structures and chance encounters suffuse such geopoetic expeditions.

Porous Borders: Intuitive Spaces and The Road as Place

“The road offered a journey into the unknown that could end up allowing us to discover who we were and where we belonged.”²

Patrick and his partners emphasize the necessity to embark on these projects with a view to surrendering themselves wholly to the phenomena and forces that completely and utterly elude them. The road allows for this prospect as it becomes a force in and of itself, a non-place that, while it can start at point A and finish at point B, supports all manner of deviation, of opportunities to take unexpected turns and to be able to eventually lose oneself – i.e.: get lost, or get oneself out of one’s own way. In creatively occupying these interstitial spaces, of willfully “extending the boundaries of the self into unknown territories,”³ the seemingly tight time frame of the project still provides only the loosest of structures within which to follow intuition and, if necessary, abandon the script.

The road is an essential motif in Patrick’s work. As a necessary site for the concrete experience of all that is elusive, it plays an important role in the production of meaning, space / place and time. To this end Patrick often speaks of his work in road metaphor: “My projects are measured in miles per hour – miles for the distances covered and hours for the encounters experienced.”

With the road’s “non-placedness,” a transitional site as space, we experience a palimpsestic geographical position where the “spatiality ... of multiple relations of *succession* ... a layering of spaces within themselves ... enfolded in others... [become a] past, present, and future [that] are always entwined and make each other possible only through their divergences and bifurcations.”⁴ What once was, what is and what could be are all overlapping circles of potential events that, while they may

² John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of PLACE, a sense of TIME*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 192

³ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, (New York: Penguin, 2005), 5

⁴ Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 127

differ, remain entwined, and are always interdependent. On the road, in constant and at moments unpremeditated movement, rolling along the highways and byways, the succession of sites traversed become a kind of accumulation, a collapsing of space across time, a simultaneous encounter of here and there. And in its persistence as cogent site, this space of transience, of movement, of succession – and detour – transforms into a locus of practice, the road taking on the characteristics of container; producing an understanding of the ways in which past events have direct impact on present and future.

In pursuing the migration of the monarch butterfly, for example, the road operates as primary venue for a mobile pseudo-science lab to monitor such “multiple relations of succession” – in particular a complex series of interdependent spatial / temporal phases that *is* the “*Vector Monarca*.” By entering into a process that leads from an intellectual awareness of entomological fact to a subjective, phenomenological encounter with nature, the artists inhabit the road as experiential progression – a device to help integrate each step of this delicate chain. And in engaging this act, the road becomes at once a site for the accumulation of “signs” that confirm the right direction, and a symbol of the infinite loop, analogous with the repetitive impermanency of the (monarch’s) life cycle.

In following the wind, the road, if ever it was in fact linear, succumbs to its sinuosity, this same “spatiality of multiple relations of succession,” carrying Patrick and his co-pilots successively forward and backward in an attempt to track the airstreams that surround them. Giving over all agency to this ever-changing current, temperamental shifts are what guided the Blue Rider from one point to the next. The resulting unpredictability in direction had them retracing their steps, a “layering of spaces” further opening up the porous border between past, present and future. “Why have a weathervane on a moving vehicle?” was asked of the travelers when, at one spot on their journey, they had to stop to take some readings with the use of their wind-tracking instruments. This paradox of confluent movements was neither lost on the artists nor their inquisitive interlocutors.

Chasing the road of luck, as it were, is even more vague than the path of the wind. For the wind, even in its ephemerality, can be palpably detected. The forces of luck, chance or fate, on the other hand, propose an even more mysterious presence. In this third and final part of the trilogy the artist and writer asked: “Can you look for luck or does luck find you?”

In sojourning toward their answer, toward an open-ended question really, the road remains an ever-significant medium – the canvas upon which a creative hypothesis is sketched. The road and its tributaries are where primary encounters took place: whether pulling into the parking lot of a gambling supply store, the pump at a gas station, or the entrance of a motel, the Magic Dart’s manifestation, an unexpected sideshow rolling into view from off the highway, would have no doubt generated intrigue. The road made it possible for this unusual spectre – a wheel of fortune – to appear.

In these “complex circuits of movement”⁵ an important transformation occurs, for the road, conventionally accepted as a “non-place,” being a site of circulation and transience that primarily serves to carry people and goods into and out of cities and towns, “can no longer be identified solely with movement from one place to another.”⁶ As consistently demonstrated in the *VVV Trilogy*, they are “increasingly the scene of work, leisure, social intercourse and excitement.”⁷ As such, the road, as an unbounded space of in-between, becomes a site for complex encounters, for the performance of intuitive explorations and meaningful connections. Finally, in these works, “roads no longer merely lead to places; they *are* places.”⁸

⁵ Yi-Fu Tuan, quoted in Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing), 46

⁶ John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of PLACE, a sense of TIME*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 190

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

Fragile Structures / Chance Encounters: How a Performative of Necessity, Intuition and Serendipity Propels You Forward

While the road functions as site – a kind of container where each project unfolds – the vehicle in which the protagonists travel acts as an extension of this container; another significant site not only for the implementation of their research but for the instigation of chance encounters (the encounters themselves another layer of this research).

Although nowadays it's not unusual to see a truck flashing some kind of message aimed at catching our attention (ads on wheels), that message is strictly about trying to sell us something. In the *VVV Trilogy*, each vehicle dons some kind of feature that also intentionally draws attention to itself, save for the fact that the artist is not interested in selling anything; he is more interested in piquing our curiosity – in engaging our consciousness – proposing to share a hospitable, spontaneous experience.

In this regard, the vehicle additionally operates as a kind of ruse – for while it is essential in carrying out each project, it is also a device for soliciting inquisitiveness. This open invitation to the outside gives way to another subtle and more delicate aspect of the trilogy, emerging as part of an ensemble of fragile structures that make up the overall work.

From project to project, several types of fragilities co-exist: that of the vehicle itself (second-hand, breaking down, in need of constant attention), that of the “matter” being investigated (nebulous environmental events), and that of the relationships being gently cultivated (happenstance interactions). The vehicle is the very hub of this fragility; it is at the nucleus of all the interconnected activity that extends outward from it.

In the case of the *Monarca Mobile*, the vehicle becomes a personification of the delicate monarch butterfly. From the beginning, this truck was beset with mechanical problems. Because of these tribulations, the truck was obliged to take secondary routes and travel quite slowly. With occasional breakdowns, the truck was also forced

to stop. The inadvertent results of these prevailing conditions produced a noteworthy circumstance: a performative of necessity – a state in which the artists were compelled to not only be more tuned in to their instrument of mobility but additionally attentive to how the monkey-wrenches of life served to open up other spaces of possibility; of discovering villages, towns and people – and hearing important stories – that would have otherwise been missed. Seeking assistance (and clearly at times sustenance!), the forced stops provided opportunities to catch glimpses of the monarch in ways that Patrick and his co-pilot hadn't expected. Actual sightings were few and far between, but serendipitous exchanges led to some surprising anecdotes about the monarch that ended up contributing significantly to the project's overall outcome.

Whether in its fullest potential as a detrimental force, or in its more complacent states, due to its very ephemerality the wind posits another fragile structure that warrants a particular attentiveness. In an attempt to poetically define it, for *Ventury*, two main activities were repeatedly undertaken. Upon arrival in each small town, Patrick found the nearest book or antique shop and inquired with the clerk: "Do you have any postcards of the wind?" The sincere query – a playful action that inspired vivid response – led to an eclectic selection of poignant, nostalgic pictures; a collection aptly titled, *aéropostales*.

The second activity was less calculated but equally rigorous. In an esthetic that paralleled the assembled postcards, Patrick videotaped various unplanned instances of observable movement in the wind (the *in a breath* series). These included: Canada geese flying in V formation; fluttering curtains kept magically afloat while pushed out of the window of an apartment building; leaves dancing on the platform of a ferryboat. In each of these cases we are made aware of how perfect and transient, of how random and potentially chaotic (yet ultimately controlled) are these events in nature. The V will eventually dissolve; the curtain will eventually fall; the leaves will disperse and disappear.

These resulting images – contemplative interpretations of effervescent currents – are finely nuanced demonstrations of all that is fleeting; of the very fragility that is “being present” (being now, being here). All of these spontaneous choreographies, instances of ethereality, are deftly captured precisely because of Patrick’s adept mindfulness. In this finely tuned performance of intuition he is able to not only be in the right place at the right time but to recognize his presence vis-à-vis these events; to be fully there, awake to the magic happening before him, able to receive it and in the final instance to capture and share it as well.

The last part of this series is the most elusive of the three pursuits. In its distinct intangibility, it proposes the most fragile structure of all. Whereby in *Vector Monarca*, the insects themselves were frequently out of sight and in *Ventury* the wind could never quite be pinned down, with *Vegas* the entity, as it were, is completely formless, a difficult-to-explain phenomenon. The final project therefore anticipated not so much to *fix* this object in time but more so to see if it could *tap into* this amorphous energy – another kind of life force that everyone can speak to either positively or negatively, yet is scientifically tricky to explain or understand. As such, from one part of the project to the next, the foundational underpinnings go from being quasi-scientific to virtually esoteric. The “matter” being researched becomes progressively immaterial. Not only are the travelers directly courting a performative of serendipity, they are inviting others to engage in this performance as well.

As such, in trying to locate the mysteries of luck, the final chapter is almost entirely predicated upon chance encounters; the participatory aspect being a key component in its undertaking. Wherever the vehicle would pull up, passers-by were invited to spin the wheel of fortune, a red, gold and green mandala bolted to the hood of the Magic Dart. “21 Turns of Fate, 21 Questions of Luck” were in the offing. This wasn’t so much a question of what you could win but what you could receive: a fortune, or a prophecy – similar to pulling a tarot card or playing the I Ching (a primary source of inspiration for the construction of this part of the trilogy). For certain participants, Patrick and Daniel represented doubtful soothsayers – one participant in particular, visibly distressed by his “bad turns” (having spun “The Dark”) appeared to hold them

responsible. It's not as if he lost anything, no bet placed, however the very fact of the two interlopers "controlling" his fate (as it were) seemed to shake him. But their charismatic appearance inspired other kinds of responses too; rounding out their trip they were treated to a parting gift. Upon their departure, the receptionist of the roadside motel where they were staying sweetly sang, "What's the Next Town" – a touching adaptation of 4 Non Blondes "What's Going On."

Stirring moments such as these are what characterize the ensemble of the *Transfrontier Trilogy*. Akin to the trajectories of Henry Thoreau, each journey is not merely an intellectual pursuit, it is a performative state of being in which the body and all its senses are activated, therefore creating a profound engagement with the landscape (and people) that surround. While Thoreau's movements were delineated by his immediate environment, his studies nonetheless give form to the very kind of geopoetic explorations that make up Patrick Beaulieu's *VVV Odyssey*.

With overlapping yet distinct objectives, each segment in its own specific way proffers a synergetic coalescing of intuition, serendipity and fragility. Ultimately this fragility is the process itself, the coordination of all the elements combined in a fine balance of intentionality and surrender. Intuition – and a very basic sense of faith (in the present moment, in the purposefulness of each quest) – is what propels the work forward. And serendipity, the magic of synchronistic happenstance, is what gives this vehicle its fuel.

Victoria Stanton