

# ARMAND VAILLANCOURT:

## The Eye and the Storm



The Don Quixote of Quebec's art scene and the sculpture of resistance

BY JOHN K. GRANDE

I first met Armand Vaillancourt while visiting Quebec City during the summer of 1987 as he was working on *Drapeau Blanc*, a monumental sculpture composed of over 92 tons of calcite brought in from the Saguenay Lac-St. Jean region to Laval University in Ste. Foy. There Vaillancourt stood, his long white hair and beard blowing in the wind, the embodiment of every Canadian post-grad art historian's search for a *living legend*.

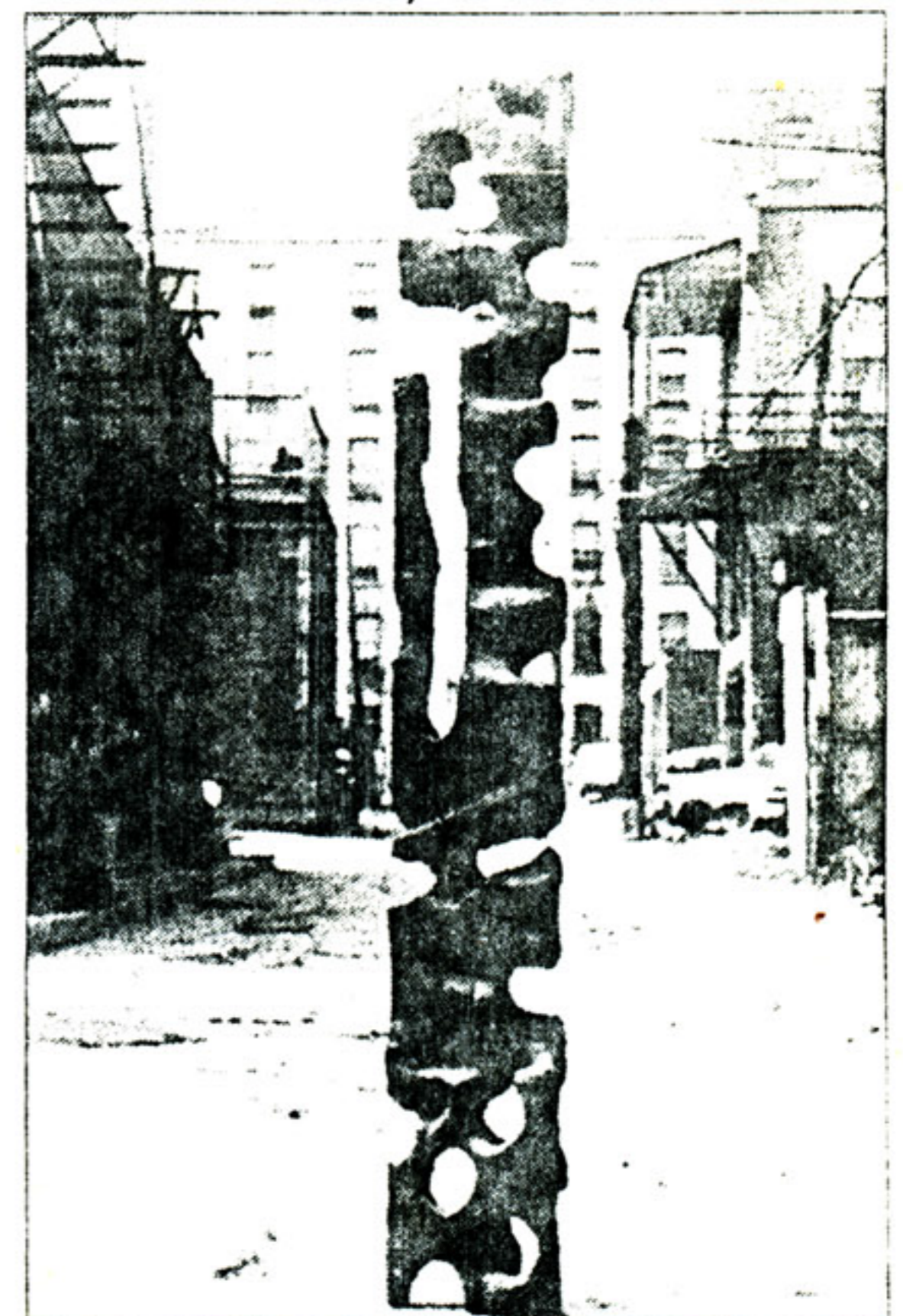
History has not treated Vaillancourt the person particularly well. His *bois brûlé* and abstract metal sculptures from the 1950s and 1960s, unquestionably some of the most original sculptures made in Canada at the time, are in most of Canada's major museum collections. But if you ask a curator, either in Quebec or elsewhere in Canada, about Vaillancourt's work, they will usually shrug or laugh, as if the question is too painful to talk about. He has never been given a solo show by a major museum nor has he represented Canada at major international events such as the Venice Biennale or Documenta. His very persona is at odds with the spin-dried tastes of today's curators, who prefer the universe to be neatly boxed or squeezed into a tight metaphoric ball for exhibition purposes.

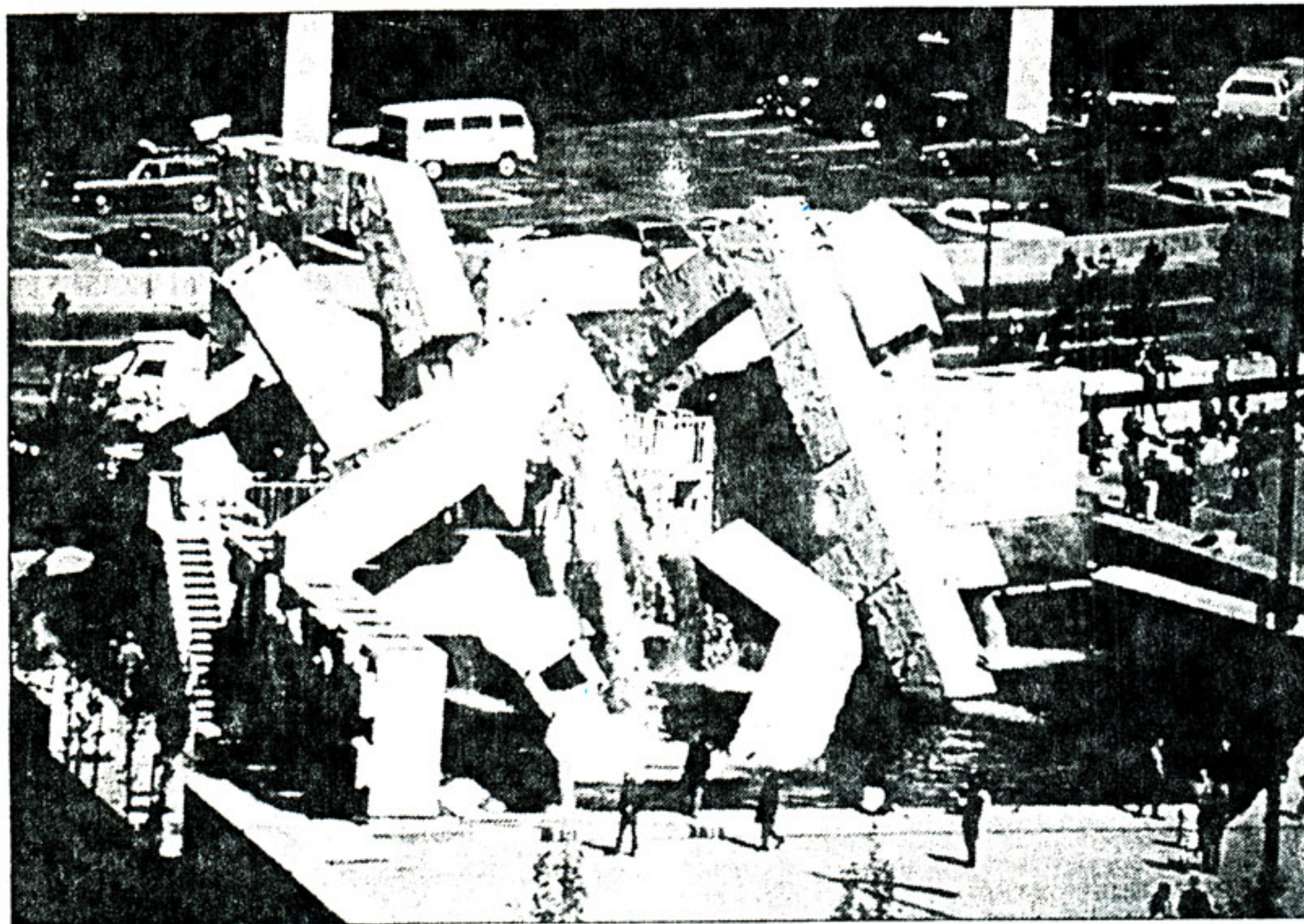
*John Grande is a Montreal-based freelance writer on the arts and the recent winner of the Prix Lison Dubreuil for arts criticism. His book Balance: Art and Nature was published this fall by Black Rose Books.*

*Right: Bois Brûlé, 1957*

### Constructing Controversy

*Drapeau Blanc*, that incongruous collection of brilliant white boulders imported from Quebec's *indépendantiste* heartland, embodies Vaillancourt's primal vision that art is a force for transforming society, an emblem of Quebec's culture of resistance in the face of a vacuous and all-pervasive North American consumer culture. Sand-blasted and carved in relief on its surface are quotes from renowned Quebecers such as singer Felix Leclerc, poet Gaston Miron and singer Gilles Vigneault. Not far from the words of an anonymous Hindu poet is a quote from Martin Luther King: "We have to learn to live together like brothers, otherwise we'll die together like idiots." Another from Quebec writer and activist Simonne Monet-Chartrand reads, "I do not want the





Québec Libre, Embarcadero Plaza, San Francisco, 1967-1971.

snow, the years and the cold to freeze my memory."

If curators have felt uneasy about Vaillancourt, the media have treated him remarkably well. No Canadian artist has ever had so much ink spilled on his work, both internationally and at home. When Vaillancourt was invited to the International Sculpture Symposium in Toronto's High Park in 1967, he proposed a monumental sculpture for the site. After three months, the 340-ton piece was finally completed in cast iron, whereupon Vaillancourt titled it *Je me souviens* and the project was aborted. Over 400 articles appeared in print, not to mention the TV interviews. When, 12 years later, then Toronto Mayor David Crombie asked Vaillancourt if he wished to reclaim the work, Vaillancourt hired a convoy of eight tractor trailers at a cost of \$12,000 to haul *Je me souviens* back to Quebec. It now sits in pieces in a field near Côteau-du-Lac awaiting a final installation site close to his former atelier, which he claims was stolen from him by the Quebec government. (Vaillancourt's deposit payment for the purchase of the Côteau-du-Lac atelier was blocked and his sculpture foundry, the best-equipped in the country at the time, destroyed. He has never been compensated.) Ironically, that same Centennial year Vaillancourt was awarded the prestigious Confederation Medal — an honour

he refused to accept, although the medal had already been mailed to him.

In 1967 Vaillancourt also won the international competition for a monumental sculpture-fountain in Embarcadero Plaza, San Francisco, adjacent to an expressway overpass. Titled *Québec Libre*, the work is better known in the United States than at home. A massive construction of rectangular concrete forms that rise dramatically out of the water, it was once described by Canadian art historian David Burnett in *Contemporary Canadian Art* as a work that "looks like a result of some massive disaster or a warning of physical and cultural upheaval". The night before its unveiling in 1971, Vaillancourt stencilled the words "Québec Libre" in red acrylic paint on its surface. The words had already been whited-out by civic employees when the dedication ceremony commenced the next day. Thomas Hoving, then Director of the Manhattan Metropolitan Museum of Art, along with a slew of civic dignitaries drawled out their specious

platitudes. Lawrence Ferlinghetti read some of his poems. Vaillancourt, who had been held back by two police officers, then jumped into the water of the fountain and painted "Québec Libre" yet again all over his creation. The San Francisco Redevelopment Agency's executive director, Justin Herman, unaware of exactly what was transpiring, asked from the podium, "If our artist is in the audience, will he please raise his hand so that we may applaud him?" Vaillancourt, seated beside the sculpture, his feet dangling in the water of the fountain, let out a loud war whoop for freedom and was instantly surrounded by a crowd of cameramen and journalists. At the inauguration bash that followed, the rock group Jefferson Airplane played for the Embarcadero Plaza audience.

Controversy has continued to linger about *Québec Libre*. Seven years ago singer Bono of the rock group U2 painted the words "Stop the traffic. Rock and Roll" on the sculpture. Still more ink was spilled. When Bono telephoned Vaillancourt to request support for his action, Vaillancourt gave it eagerly. The next day he was in San Francisco painting "Stop the Madness" on stage at the Oakland Colosseum before a crowd of 70,000

spectators while U2 performed their popular Joshua Tree show. Pronouncements about justice for American blacks, the Amerindians and the peoples of the world followed. "Graffiti is a necessary disease," declared Vaillancourt in defence of the rock star's actions.

During the recent San Francisco earthquake the expressway next to Embarcadero Plaza collapsed. The plaza was damaged and

the whole area is now undergoing extensive reconstruction. The City of San Francisco's chief urban design consultant has recommended that Vaillancourt's sculpture (which was not damaged) either be demolished or moved in order to make way for "a

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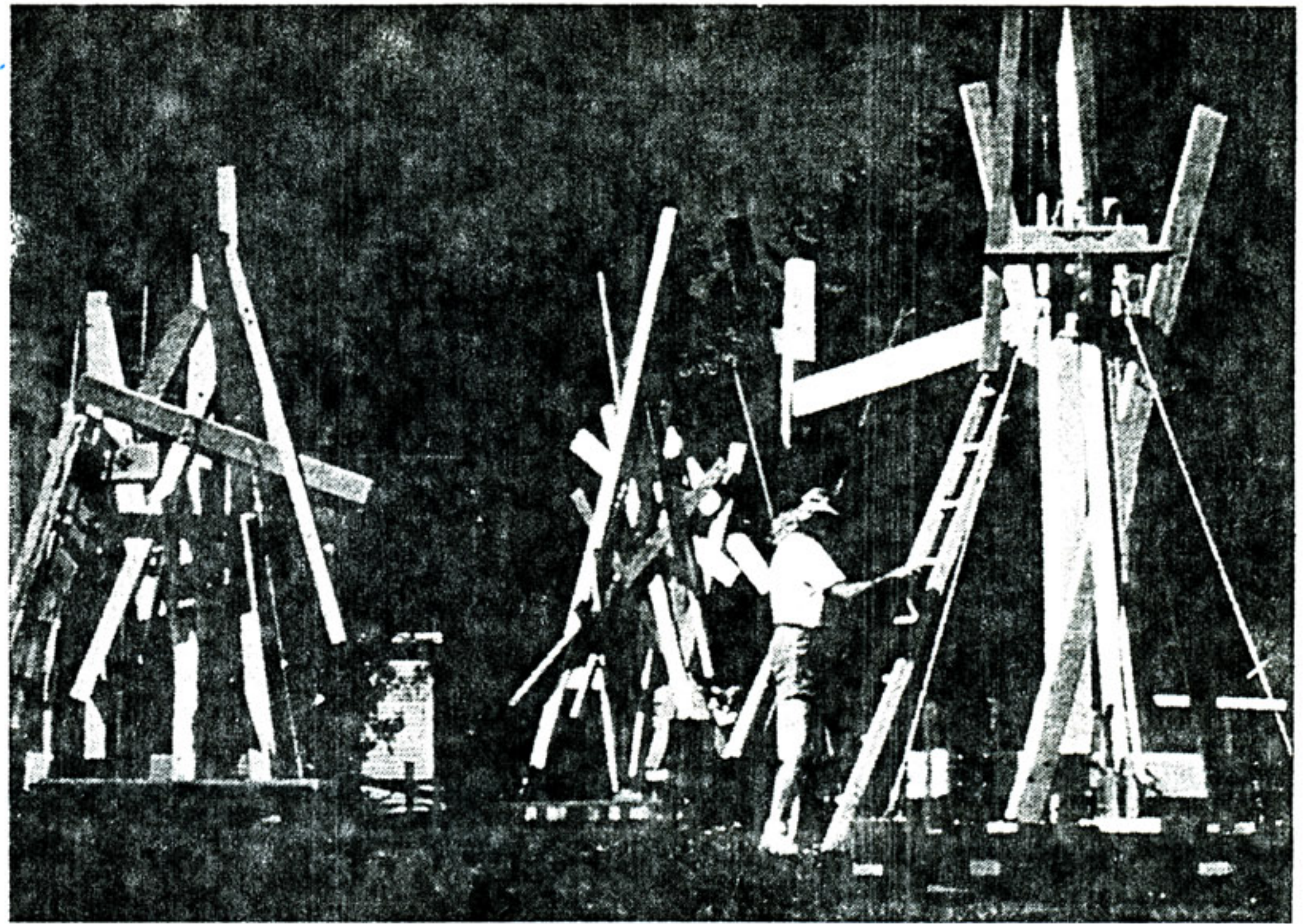
better people gathering place". The subsequent dilemma over artists' rights surrounding *Québec Libre's* aesthetic, historic and civic importance remains unresolved. A committee has been organized to defend Vaillancourt's sculpture and the legal ramifications promise to be as fascinating as the controversy that surrounded the dismantling of Richard Serra's 1981 *Tilted Arc* sculpture in Manhattan's Federal Plaza, a work that did not prove popular with the New York public.

Most Quebeckers still remember the fiasco during the 1970s when Vaillancourt was scheduled to make an appearance on Lise Payette's popular TV program *Apellez-moi Lise*. To protest what he saw as the manipulation of the masses by the program Vaillancourt stripped himself naked before the cameras. The program never aired.

Last year Vaillancourt was presented Quebec's most prestigious arts award, the Prix Paul-Émile Borduas. In his acceptance speech, broadcast live on Radio Québec, Vaillancourt railed against the state of Quebec and North American culture:

"I want to share this honour with all the dispossessed of the earth, in shouting my helplessness in the face of the rapes, the social inequalities, the abused children, the tortured, the genocides, the market and trade of organs. How can one remain indifferent to the atrocities of the Gulf War, to those of Bosnia, Haiti, Angola, where 2,000 people die each day, to the invasion of Panama, and finally to the countless injustices done to developing countries? How can we remain indifferent, in the warmth of our homes, seated comfortably in front of the television, looking on as the horrors happening around the world pass before our eyes? How can one advocate art for art's sake, without being concerned about how the well being of some brings about the unhappiness of others?"

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Hommage aux Amerindiens, 1991-1992.

Yet this past summer, Vaillancourt was again refused a grant by Quebec's Ministère de la Culture. He talks of mortgage payments and hydro bills at the same time as he shows slides of recent computer-animated designs for a 110-metre tower of steel dedicated to planetary conscience, proposed for the banks of the Eastman River, now dried up due to the James Bay hydro project. An ascending spiral ladder with lights and hundreds of suspended bells, and an observatory with satellite communications equipment on top, Vaillancourt's *Tour Écologique* — like *El Clamor*, his nearly completed wall of stone with sculpted hands in Santo Domingo — seeks further funding.

#### Quebec Roots

Born at Black Lake in the Eastern Townships on September 3, 1929, the 16th of 17 children, Vaillancourt grew up on a 300-acre farm with no electricity or indoor toilet. Some of his earliest memories are of freezing in the bitter cold as he sat on the logs his father cut with a whipsaw. He took a course in classical

studies at the University of Ottawa in 1949 and 1950 before moving to Montreal in 1951 where he studied at the École des Beaux-arts until 1954. It was during this time that Vaillancourt created his first major public work, *The Tree of Durocher Street*, now at the Musée du Québec in Québec City. Over a period of two years, Vaillancourt worked out of doors before crowds of onlookers, carving, cutting and shaping the tree with hand tools and an axe. After the work was completed in 1957 the famous Russian sculptor associated with the early days of Cubism in Paris, Ossip Zadkine, then visiting Canada for an exhibition of his own work, knelt before Vaillancourt's sculpture and proclaimed it the work of a master. Zadkine invited Vaillancourt to work in Paris, but Vaillancourt was already committed to working in Quebec.

In 1961, for the International Festival of Contemporary Music in Montreal, Vaillancourt created a musical environment composed of 22 tons of self-created musical instruments and a motorcycle, a work he still refers to as the most daring show of his life, "an orgy with matter". Yoko Ono later used it for a recital of her poems and John Cage, who also performed at the festival, referred to it as the work of a genius. Word of Vaillancourt's musical event spread. Experimental composer Edgar Varese invited him to Greenwich Village to



Vaillancourt and rock singer Bono onstage, Oakland, California, 1987.

meet Picasso and other artists of the era. Choreographer Merce Cunningham asked him to create the decor and music for his experimental theatre in New York. But, again, Vaillancourt was too busy at home.

### Tools of the Trade

The second time I met Vaillancourt was in Montreal in 1989. Approaching his studio on Esplanade St. in Montreal, with its view of Mount Royal, I could see a large, as yet uncarved, African tree trunk in the yard. Not far away, beside some old oil barrels, three sheets of metal with the word "JUSTICE!" carved into them sat in restive solitude, like talismans guarding the artist's studio. The building has a theatrical and slightly comical roof, like a grenadier's hat with a spire on top. Entering Vaillancourt's home the first objects I noticed were the sculpting tools that he had just taken out of his station wagon: a large mallet covered in duct

tape, an axe, adzes and chisels in a large bucket. There was a vast array of materials — styrofoam package forms, blocks of wood, I-beams, strips of metal and street signs. The evidence of his past production (over 3,000 sculptures and 2,000 paintings) lay strewn everywhere, including several exquisite small bronzes cast in the lost wax technique, collages, acrylic and watercolour paintings, paper prints from his Manhole Series cast from actual City of Montreal sewer ducts, and a *maquette* of *Je me souviens*.

In an adjacent room, not far from an old piano, amid the disarray of Vaillancourt's irrepressible creative spirit, was one of his famous large-scale *bois brûlé* sculptures dating from 1953-1965. Enormous and ominously primeval, these works made from tree trunks still seem an invitation to some earthly paradise — not that of Gauguin, but a northern one, a world not yet created but somehow antici-

pated in Vaillancourt's life struggle as an artist. Vaillancourt's *bois brûlés* are among the strongest ever made in wood by a Canadian sculptor, extending Borduas's *automatiste* painterly style into the much more difficult medium of sculpture. Technically, they were an innovation. Using a drill to carve as many as 200 holes, each 3 or 4 inches in diameter, along a single tree trunk of up to 8 feet in length, Vaillancourt would pour oil onto select areas and allow the fire to burn into the wood, dousing it afterwards with water. The innovation allowed a deeper, more controlled modelling, the fire acting differently according to the varied densities of the wood. Today his *bois brûlés* are rare collector's items.

Styrofoam casting was another technical innovation pioneered by Vaillancourt in the 1950s. Using a flame he created large moulded shapes in seconds out of styrofoam. The model could then be set in a sand mould before being cast in iron. It allowed Vaillancourt to work with monumental sculpture in a way never before attempted anywhere in the world. The action of the flame on styrofoam was instant and the forms purely spontaneous but highly controlled abstractions. *La Force* (1964), located on Mount Royal near Beaver Lake, used 74,000 pounds of cast iron and took three days to cool down after the cast had been made. There is a rare balance in Vaillancourt's *bois brûlé*, between artistic intention and the unique characteristics of the materials he used.

### The Conscience of an Artist

"Art has an essential role to play in the collectivity, the society," warns Vaillancourt, "and the artist conscious of this role must fulfill it with joy, whatever happens in his own personal life or his work." Vaillancourt's commitment to social change resurfaces continually in the performances, sporadic sculpture and painting events he stages or participates in. In one of his first public performances in the 1950s he paraded through the Montreal business district wearing a sandwich-board clock on which were painted the words "Don't Lose Your Time". But Vaillancourt has also built practical no-nonsense engineering pieces, including a

500-foot sea wall in San Francisco and a fully functioning 200-foot, 80,000-pound modernist steel bridge for the citizens of Plessisville, Quebec. In a controversial work titled *Paix, Justice et Liberté* created in June 1989, he inscribed the names of 32 of Quebec's leading corporations involved in the arms trade with their annual profit figures onto an enormous discarded cistern placed in the downtown shopping area of Crescent St. in Montreal. Written on the work were the words "Two days of military expenditures worldwide, around 5 billion dollars, would allow the United Nations to stop the desertification of the world within 20 years."

This past year, yet another controversy developed over Vaillancourt's *Hommage aux Amerindiens*, an eclectic assemblage of 13 tepee-like sculptures made out of recycled wood painted in bright colours and featuring traditional Native symbols, bolted together and dedicated to the Amerindian and Innu tribes. Originally exhibited in front of the Standard Life Building on Sherbrooke Street in 1991 and then at numerous other sites in Quebec, it was cut into pieces with a jigsaw and destroyed by the avant-gardist theatre group Carbon 14 not long after they bought the building, despite the fact they had earlier given their permission for the works to be stored there. Vaillancourt was never notified of their intention.

Vaillancourt's art can be readily appreciated by English Canadians for its theatrical flair, if one ignores the political jargon on both sides, particularly when contrasted with the straight puritanism of Toronto's quasi-engagé "official" arts scene.

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secret behind Vaillancourt's art ultimately comes from his love of life, from the people he has known over the years and from nature — the primary source of his inspiration. During the 1950s he spent nine months in the country in monastic solitude to reflect on his own private questions about life's purpose. "The city makes us blind and makes us forget the meaning of life," he says. "I discovered in solitude that silence is the best of friends."

Now over 65 years old, this aging, media-wise Don Quixote of Quebec's art scene has been working with children and young adults in Quebec schools to encourage and develop another generation's interest in creative expression. "I do not want to be a spectator in a world that is building itself," says Vaillancourt. "My mission is to maintain the spirit of humanity and make it grow. I must conquer matter to give it back its freedom in other forms." ■

His separatist aspirations of the past remain pure and distant from Parizeau's small "C" conservatism and he still regrets René Lévesque giving up in 1984 what he calls the "beau risque". In the recent Quebec election, Vaillancourt ran for the NDP in the Westmount-St. Louis riding. The only artist to run for public office in the entire province, he was attracted by the party's claim that the state should serve the artist. The paradoxes present in Vaillancourt's life and art stem from his insistent curiosity and spontaneity, his constant belief that art has an important role to play in building a vision for society. But the

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