

This essay accompanies the Gallery TPW exhibition *Doyon-Rivest: thanks for being there*
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The Doyon-Rivest Spin-offs: Advertising, Multiples, or Ready-mades?

By Julie Lavigne

Since they created their Doyon-Rivest “corporate” identity in 2000, artists Mathieu Doyon and Simon Rivest have been exploring the interrelationships between advertising and art. In particular, the pair mimics methods of advertising in order to examine its specificities and functions. It should be mentioned that the pseudo-firm is well versed in advertising strategy since, in addition to being an artist, Simon Rivest is employed at an ad agency. In this sense, Doyon-Rivest’s examination and critique of both advertising and art come from within the practices themselves, making the critique multidimensional – and more ambiguous. The firm’s works are quite distinct from the virulent and explicit critiques of advertising offered by the Canadian magazine *Adbusters*. In fact, at first glance, it is almost impossible to tell the difference between a Doyon-Rivest work and a real advertisement.

The Mediacom-type billboard is the artists’ favourite format for this purpose, because they can use it to present images with the firm’s logo in plain sight.¹ Only in the artistic context in which the work is presented and through close scrutiny is it possible to comprehend the deception. That is, no product is actually being promoted in the images produced by the firm, and there is always a misplaced detail in the *mise-en-scène* that literally reverses the meaning of the image. An ad intended to sell the image of a company’s brand proves, in reality, to be a simulacrum of an ad promoting a fictional firm – a self-promotion of the Doyon-Rivest collective. With this practice, the artists necessarily aim to exploit advertising strategies for artistic ends, just as advertising did with art for more than a century. Moreover, it is obvious that Doyon-Rivest is attempting to blur the border between advertising and art and to reduce, subversively, the gap between great art and a practice belonging to mass culture, and a commercial one, at that.

In this new exhibition, *thanks for being there*, Doyon-Rivest shows us the underside of the advertising scene. The installa-

tion re-creates, more or less, an ad agency, a hybrid and fairly abstract site that also includes an exhibition space where some of the merchandise created by the firm is displayed. In other words, viewers are invited into the environment where the promotion strategies for the Doyon-Rivest trademark are developed – in a sense, the firm’s war room.¹¹ Concretely, the installation includes photographic settings of the firm’s products, a few samples of merchandise, and a PowerPoint-type projection. The projection presents exactly what an ad agency would present during a client meeting: a market study, with its many graphs showing results, a few illustrations of possible uses of the products, and test shots for an ad campaign. However, when we examine the different graphics in the market study, we realize that it’s a fake, for how is it possible to quantify faith, love, and fidelity, as they claim to do? These market studies prove to be completely absurd and comical. In keeping with its previous productions, Doyon-Rivest usurps advertising means, deflecting them from their utilitarian purposes and, thus, completely voiding their primary meaning. The artists transform the advertising visuals and aesthetic to produce an artistic and disinterested work. The images



Doyon-Rivest, thanks for being there, 2005



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presented in the projection also serve as a preparatory study for the formulation of Doyon-Rivest's own artistic production, which is composed of the same photographic settings of the product or fake advertisements. As a consequence, the projection is both a false market study and a form of reinterpretation of the sketch as a preparatory study for a work adapted to the photographic medium. In this sense, the installation brings the techniques of advertising and artistic creation closer in a way that somewhat demystifies, in a humorous but cavalier way, the creative genius of the artist. Already, in choosing to form a duo, the artists have undermined the classic structure of creative genius as a unique and exceptional subjectivity, a structure that is, in fact, largely supported by traditional art history.^{III}

In the same spirit, Doyon-Rivest interprets the exhibition space. By re-creating an exhibition space in a gallery, the installation indirectly creates new parallels between the techniques used in marketing and those used in the art world. After all, what is an exhibition space if not a room in which products for a future client are featured? By inserting a fictional exhibition space into a real gallery, Doyon-Rivest effectively exposes the similarities that exist between the two types of exhibition site. These uncommon connections abruptly deconsecrate the contemporary-art scene. One could thus interpret the exhibition space as a commercial, even vulgar, play-within-a-play of the gallery in which *thanks for being there* appears. Doyon and Rivest are seeking to establish yet another parallel between great art and commercial culture while exposing the chasm that elitist practice wants to dig between itself and its popular sibling. Although the process of making an exhibition is very similar, the object presented is very different: between the consumer object, very often mass-produced, and the art object, which gains its value from its uniqueness, there is a huge gap. Yet, the objects offered by Doyon-Rivest in the pseudo-exhibition space once again blur the marked distinctions between mass culture and great art.

In effect, almost all of the objects presented in *thanks for being there* correspond to banal merchandise. There are a few exceptions, such as the boat and the yoga mat, which are more like featured products for a company that is displaying its brand, or the trophy and the drum set, which constitute a site for self-expression by the owner of the object. But other Doyon-Rivest objects – the ball, the pencil, the cup, and the

rain poncho – are perfect items for promotion of a trademark. This is, in fact, a common marketing strategy, a simple and insidious form of mobile advertising: the customer is offered a practical gift – a pencil, for example – that promotes the company when the customer uses it. By creating these objects, Doyon-Rivest is simply exploring a new advertising medium. The advertising photograph gives way to three-dimensional objects in which only the logo of the pseudo-firm subsists. The artistic practice of transforming a banal, everyday object into an art object simply by signing it is reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades. However, Doyon-Rivest's offering completely perverts the nature of the ready-made. In effect, these are not everyday objects that are slightly transformed to give them a different function or a surprising significance (such as Duchamp's 1917 *Fontaine*). Rather, they are everyday objects to which, simply, a logo-signature has been attached. The artists thus subvert the function of the object not by making it surreal and strange, but by transforming it into false merchandise or into true art merchandise – in other words, a multiple. The critical function is not at all the same. In this sense, Doyon-Rivest's practice is much more closely related to pop art than to a Duchampian ready-made. Umberto Eco explains the difference between the two practices as follows:

In ready-made surrealist objects, the kitsch used in the composition of disturbing collage was implicitly condemned. Whereas in pop art kitsch is *redeemed*. Banality, bad taste, the violent colors of commercial objects, lowbrow advertisements and horror comics are raised by the artist into a new state of esthetic dignity.^{IV}

In fact, Doyon-Rivest states forthrightly "Our work is not intended to be a critique of or an apologia for advertising, but an appropriation, a taking advantage of this powerful media system in a world where we are literally bombarded with images of all sorts."^V In this appropriation of advertising, the artists take the advertising aesthetic into the realm of art and state by this very fact how it is of visual interest in an artistic process.

The advertising aesthetic is even more obviously highlighted in the photographic settings for the Doyon-Rivest merchandise – so much so that it is difficult to discern what distinguishes this series of photographs from a real ad



Doyon-Rivest, thanks for being there, 2005



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campaign. It appears obvious, however, if one looks a little more closely, that the photographs are not advertisements; each image has an ineffable quality that is not compatible with this purpose. Nevertheless, the photographs follow to the letter the new precepts of advertising: the attractive setting of the target product and the prominence of the trademark. It is difficult to figure out what is off-pitch in the image, and this is what makes Doyon-Rivest's artistic practice so strong. It is impossible to analyze all of the photographs individually, so we shall look at one example: the image of the woman in the shower. Everything in this photograph glows with happiness: a pregnant woman relaxes in the shower, lightly veiled by a Doyon-Rivest shower curtain. The image is bathed in perfect lighting; even the logo formally reiterates the round shape of the future mother. So, what do we find jarring? In this case, we have trouble when we try to make sense of the image. Theoretically, this ad highlights an object and a trademark: the shower curtain and the Doyon-Rivest logo. Yet, would a company choose a shower curtain as a visibility vehicle for its trademark? It is not impossible, but it is unlikely. On the other hand, it is very revealing that the image takes on its full meaning when we know the identity of the firm Doyon-Rivest. In effect, since the scene of the woman in the shower is apprehended by the viewer only through a screen signed by

an artists' collective, it is appropriate to understand that the advertisement is found fictitiously behind the artistic filter symbolized, not without irony, by the shower curtain. The Doyon-Rivest merchandise thus becomes the symbol for the true artistic contribution to the image, rather than being a placement in an advertising image. The artists are thus taking advantage of a characteristically commercial strategy.

In Doyon-Rivest's previous works, the logo-signature was placed on the surface of the false ad. Here, however, it is literally immersed in the image of the ad to disrupt its meaning. The artists display their logo-signature more insidiously, exposing the omnipresence of visible trademarks in our society. The image of the people wearing rain ponchos evokes it well: wherever we are, it is difficult to escape the dissemination of trademarks, since they follow us and literally stick to our skin thanks to designer-label clothes. But, as in all of its productions, Doyon-Rivest questions how advertising is made while abstaining from criticizing it directly. The artists leave it to viewers to form their own opinion. In this sense, the great strength of *thanks for being there* is that it exhibits, in a shrewd and humorous way, certain advertising strategies yet remains an open work^{vi} from which viewers can draw their own conclusions.

ⁱ The "Mediacom" format was used for works in Doyon-Rivest's first solo exhibition, *Vos spécialistes en création de besoins*, at L'Œil de Poisson, an artist-run centre in Quebec City, in 2001, and in the installation *Parce que vous allez et venez*, which appeared in an exhibition organized by the Centre d'art Public, *Artefact 2004*.

ⁱⁱ A war room is "a room where strategic decisions are made (especially for military or political campaigns)," according to Princeton University's electronic dictionary: wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn. This definition applies perfectly to the site, often ephemeral, where strategic decisions are made in an ad agency.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a critique of recourse to the myth of creative genius in art history, see Griselda Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

^{iv} Umberto Eco, "Lowbrow Highbrow, Highbrow Lowbrow," in Carol Anne Mahsun (ed.), *Pop Art: The Critical Dialogue* (Ann Arbor and London: U.M.I. Research Press, 1989), p. 228.

^v Doyon/Rivest, "Stratégies du potentiel affectif," *Espace*, No. 63 (Spring 2003): 16 (our translation).

^{vi} This expression was coined by Umberto Eco in his now-classic *L'œuvre ouverte* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, Collection Points, No. 107, series Essais). In short, Eco uses the expression "open work" to mean that "the work of art is a fundamentally *ambiguous message*, a plurality of signifieds that coexist in a single signifier" (italics in original), p. 9 (our translation).

About the Artists

The interdisciplinary approach of Doyon-Rivest owes much to their shared interests in visual arts, communications design and music. Mathieu Doyon has a dual artistic career in visual arts and music. Very involved in the artist-run culture of Quebec City, he is also a drummer and composer. Simon Rivest's dual career spans visual arts and advertising design, working as a writer and art director for a major Canadian ad agency, Rivest also dabbles in music. Doyon-Rivest have exhibited with national and international venues such as Articule in Montreal, VU Gallery in Québec City, and Bunkier Sztuki in Poland.

About the Writer

Julie Lavigne is currently a post-doctoral trainee at the Centre de Recherche en Éthique at the Université de Montréal. She recently earned her doctorate in art history from McGill University. Her research is focused on contemporary art, the history of feminist art, and ethics. She is also responsible for the column "Démarche artistique contemporaine" for the magazine *Les Cahiers du 27 juin*. Lavigne's writings have been published in *Globe. Revue internationale d'études québécoises*, *Parachute*, and *Espace*.

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