Best practices and institutional models

Round table with Tiphaine Girault (SPiLL.PROpagation), William-Jacomo Beauchemin (Exeko), Julie Tremble (Vidéographe)
December 5, 2019, in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal (Quebec, Canada)

This conference is part of *Interrogating Access*, a series of talks and workshops on accessibility in art and media production developed by OBORO and Spectrum Productions with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts. OBORO and Spectrum Productions acknowledge that their activities take place in Tiohtià:ke, an unceded Kanien'kehá:ka territory.

(Beginning of transcription)

Tiphaine Girault

[Interpreter's voice]
Thank you for your introduction. Thank you for inviting us both to come and share our examples of best practices.

SPiLL.PROpagation is an idea; and SPiLL is the arts center for sign language.

I'll be telling you about some of the projects that we did. One major project

that has had influence is the manifesto. Now, we know that the word "manifesto" can be misunderstood, and we wouldn't want that. It's a really positive word.

In this manifesto, we address the deconstruction of phonocentrism.

In the social world, people think that everything is focused on what can be heard, on speech. We had this discussion when we created the manifesto, and everyone agreed to sign it.

Basically, we were sowing a seed, with a goal to reap activities, or changes, where each person could act in their own capacity to disseminate sign language and visual arts.

I'll give you another example: it's a theatre play. It was created in Gatineau. There are three Deaf actors, plus two more who are allies.

The artists created the play, but what was really special and had a real impact on the audience was that the actors had several options for expression: in Quebec Sign Language, American Sign Language, Persian Sign Language, and through drawing and cartooning, all at the same time. So everything was happening, three different stories simultaneously on stage. The audience could walk from one person to the next, take a look and try to understand a little bit of what was happening.

It gave the audience an idea of what we Deaf people experience when we look at hearing people speaking, and we can't understand. We look at each person separately, and we don't really understand what's going on. So we created this experience for the audience.

Then, still relating to the manifesto—remember that it was the little seed that we sowed to grow more ideas—we discussed what we were going to do and we came up with "signécologie."

Here is the sign for *signécologie*: [sign]

So, we consider phonocentrism, languages everywhere in the world, the arts. And it's an ecological system, basically. It's how all this lives together, every day. How can we succeed in linking all of it? That means, then, that

everyone is welcome, not just Deaf people, and everyone can participate in *signécologie*.

On the screen, we see at the top of the slide the definition of *signécologie*. What we're saying is that *signécologie* is everyone—Anne, Ms. Tremble, Julie, all people are part of *signécologie*. Each project that's shared, put in common with a link creates *signécologie*. It's like ecology, basically, but it's "sign ecology."

This discussion that I'm bringing you tonight, I know that it will launch many conversations and bring up several questions.

We can also wonder what the differences can be between accessibility and allies. I'll give you some short examples to help you understand the difference.

Recently, we set up a residence. With the artists, we included Emmanuelle Jacques who is an ally of our SPiLL group, and she helped and guided us in making a map.

So we, the Deaf artists, brought the Ottawa-Gatineau map and said, "Well, before, it used to be like that, such and such building," and we put colours to identify them. When it's red, it's because there are ASL interpreters; when it's blue, LSQ interpreters; and sometimes the colour is gray, because there was something before, but the services have disappeared over time.

Parliament is a good example of a gathering place, because of the visibility. If the interpreter is on the lawn, and the deaf people are at the bottom, the interpreters are at the top of the stairs—you know how Parliament's laid out—it's a good space for a gathering. So it's red.

Another example of an ally having a strong impact is at the National Gallery of Canada. A while back, someone used to work there, by the name of Elizabeth Sweeney. She worked at the National Gallery of Canada at the time, and the Deaf would go there, because she really made sure everything was accessible. She left to go to work at the Canada Council for the Arts. Now, with her leaving, the museum, which was labeled red and blue as accessible, has turned gray. Then, because of what we did as Deaf artists, even Vidéographe came, and *signécologie* started to bring things

back to life again.

So it's important to have allies, it's important to have exchanges, to have learning. Of course, it can be scary at first, because there aren't any ready-made answers. So together, we learn how to work, sometimes overlapping, sometimes together, sometimes each on our own. We sow a seed, we go to one side. For example, Anne, all of this, everyone gets together and we work together, so that's *signécologie*. It allows for greater strength and creativity, an infinite possibility of creativity.

Another example was at Eyelevel, which is another artist-run arts center. At *Flotilla*, we went to a lecture. There was an event, and someone there was working with podcasts. So they asked Paula and me, "We'd love to make a podcast." But I use sign language, and a podcast isn't really an appropriate medium for someone who uses sign language! [laughs]

So that made us think, "How are we going to do this?" We got our heads around it a bit. What could we do? We weren't afraid, and we said, "Well, there must be a way of doing this." We talked, and decided: "Good, very well, I'm going to express myself in my language." So the interviewer was asking questions, and Paula was interpreting, and writing down what I said. We looked at it, and created the text respecting both cultures, then we gave this text to someone who read it and made the podcast. So there were three cultures involved in this podcast.

For those who listened to the podcast, there was quite an impact. Some people had an awakening, and said: "Okay, I want to become their ally," or "I'm curious," or "Ah, well, look at that, they're working on such and such project." So the podcast enabled us to do that. It's always a good thing to have an ally.

This is an example where maybe we should think about the difference between accessibility and being an ally; between simply providing accessibility, and being an ally.

In individual arts or collective arts, for example, we can say: "Okay, let's go, let's do it, then we'll see how it turns out."

We also have this video. The title is: *À l'intention des lieux de diffusion*

[Information for venues]. You can watch this video at home, it can easily be found on the web. There's information for you, namely about what you can do, and what work is needed to become an ally. There's someone here, Julie, who is part of this video. Anne participated too.

It's interesting to see this information, which is very useful, because artists need it. It's worth taking the time to watch it, at your own pace.

Today's event here is an example of this, with Tamar, and how we got in touch. Two or three years ago, the Est-Nord-Est arts centre organized a residency for artists. Tamar was invited. She came to give a lecture, and then almost automatically became an ally. Since then, we've discussed curation, how we can establish it, how we can submit projects.

And the system… Well, hearing people are used to living within a certain system, but for us, that isn't necessarily the case.

So Karen Spencer, who is an ally, and it's very interesting to see that, well… We were walking around with our little Deaf group, and she took one look at us and said, "Come, come, come!" Okay, okay! What we did, as artists, is that we went to the beach, set up a clothesline between some trees, and really used the public space.

She pulled us out of our comfort zone and said: "Okay, now we're going out into the public space, we're doing a kind of 'coming-out' and showing everyone what we're able to do in that public space." Public space is a very interesting concept, and it has a great impact. Sometimes you'll see comics, or poetry, or videos, and it all has a different impact.

I don't know how much of an impact *signécologie* has had, but I think it can touch a lot of people all around the world.

That's all!

William-Jacomo Beauchemin

Hello everyone. Thank you for the invitation. It's a pleasure to be here and speak about accessibility.

I'm with a non-profit organization called Exeko, which focuses on issues of social inclusion through art and philosophy. We have different types of projects, ranging from artist residencies to mobile libraries, to social reflection workshops in youth centres, and so on.

On the topic of accessibility, this evening I'll tell you about a project that we carried out over the last three years, called "Integrative Culture Laboratory." We did this project to try to understand how cultural institutions could become more open, more accessible, and more inclusive.

The project was carried out with ten cultural institutions in Montreal, including several all around us here today: the TNM next door, Place des Arts, the BAnQ, and the city's two major orchestras. They're listed on the screen.

We also included in the process various social, community and artistic organizations that work with populations who may encounter barriers in accessing culture. We didn't work with every community dealing with obstacles, but those we worked with have fairly important barriers. I'll do a quick introduction of these community and social partners.

For the neuroatypical community, we worked with the Montreal Association for the Intellectually Handicapped, and with Les Muses, which is a professional training centre in performing arts.

We also worked with mental health organizations, including Les Impatients, which organizes art workshops for people living with mental health challenges, and Projet Collectif en inclusion à Montréal, which has more of a grassroots intervention approach on these issues.

We worked with people in at-risk situations, including L'Itinéraire newspaper and the Maison Tangente youth centre.

We also worked with families and young people from immigrant communities, and people of colour: Maison de la Syrie, which aims at disseminating and promoting Syrian cultures, and Bout du Monde, a collective of young Black artists.

These are all great organizations, and I encourage you to get to know them. Our goal was to work with all these folks to try to understand how cultural institutions can become more accessible and inclusive.

In the first two years of the project, from 2016 to 2018, we worked in close partnership with these institutions, using more traditional social science approaches: interviews, program narrative analysis, programming, projects, and so on.

During this time, we also went on outings in cultural institutions with groups from our partner community organizations. So, we'd put together groups and go explore the space for the first time, and ask ourselves, "What makes an institution accessible and inclusive?" using active research methods.

Then a few days later we'd go see a show, and do participatory observation, again using creative techniques. For example, it could be exploring the space, taking photos, taking notes, and so on.

And, finally, a few days after this outing, we would meet, and use our analysis grid to try to see what makes an institution accessible or inclusive, and what we could recommend to institutions to improve on that.

We did this for two years. They were really quite memorable experiences. Also, in these first two years, we did invisible theatre tours with intervention actors to try to understand what inclusion and accessibility meant in these institutions. We used this when we saw that there might be sensitive points for institutions in terms of accessibility, things where we wondered if we pushed a little, they would hold up, or not.

To do this, we created incognito scenarios, where actors would be testing certain barriers. For example, someone with vertigo needing to be relocated in a venue after being seated in a balcony, or someone entering a venue with an appearance that clashed with the look of their traditional audience. So we pushed a few sensitive buttons, to see what happened and document it, and to see what best responses institutions were giving in these types of borderline situations.

That was a quick overview of our methodology in the first years. In the third year, we took results from these three approaches to try to map the issues,

and understand what the problems truly are in terms of accessibility and inclusion.

From this map, we worked to link the issues thematically. We then had thematic workshops where people discussed these problems and issues, and possible best solutions, in different ways. We developed collaborative methodologies for this step.

This past October at the Maison du Conseil des arts de Montréal, we took the results of these workshops and put them to the test in a co-writing forum to draw up a "cultural accessibility charter." Participants worked to validate the content, to see if what had come out of the workshops still made sense, so that we could gather it all up in a charter. We're presently in the process of refining this charter with institutions and partners.

What's interesting in this whole process of thinking about access is the definition that it produced of the concept of accessibility. In other words, in this process we saw that people were using these concepts in very different ways, so things weren't always clear. By having so many different participants around the table, we had an opportunity to try to clarify overall meanings. We identified three key concepts that can serve as a sort of ethical compass for cultural organizations and institutions. These concepts are accessibility, inclusion and equity. I'll give you some definitions to reflect on and fuel conversation.

Accessibility is the concept that brings us together this evening. When we scratched the surface, we saw that accessibility regroups a series of issues that relate to the factual possibility, or impossibility, for people to be users of cultural institutions, and to do so independently. So, in other words: can a person who wants to go to see a show, or to the library, and so on, can they do it by themself, or are there any barriers to using the institution? So that brings us to different types of accessibility issues:

Physical accessibility: Can a person move around the institution?

Social accessibility: Does the person feel comfortable there, do they feel welcome?

Geographic accessibility: Can a person simply go there, or do they live too

far away for there to be actual cultural offerings nearby?

Economic accessibility: Can a person afford to go to a show, or are all ticket prices very expensive?

Accessibility of communication: Does the person understand the content, or is it jargon from a specialized art sector?

Over three years, we saw that there were issues related to these five themes, and that all five address the possibility, or not, for a person to decide independently to go and use a cultural institution.

A very important aspect here is to distinguish accessibility from approaches of inclusion. Inclusion approaches and the concept of inclusion itself appeared around the years 1990–2000, at the same time as the concept of cultural mediation. Basically, when you look at inclusion practices, it's about reaching out to people and bringing them in. It's not about ensuring that there aren't any barriers for people to use the institution, but trying to reach out to them where they are, in their communities.

There's been in recent years a surge of projects of this type in various cultural institutions. These are projects for families, school groups, or community groups. For example, it can be inviting a group to come and see a play, or having an integrated creation project that will be presented on stage, at the TNM for example, with various groups who deal with mental health or neurodevelopmental challenges. So this is another method of intervention for cultural institutions that's complementary to accessibility. Finally, the third category is that of equity. In the beginning, we didn't necessarily think about it. When we started this project, we didn't have the concept of equity in mind. But throughout the years working on the project, we realized that it was a major concern that we couldn't bypass.

Equity—the way that several organizations use it, whether it's Réalisatrices Équitables, who focus on the visibility of women film directors, Femmes pour l'Équité en Théâtre, or Diversité artistique Montréal, who published a report on cultural equity processes relevant to artists of colour— equity always comes down to the question of representation for certain communities that aren't necessarily minorities, but are minoritized, placed in a position of inferiority, and not by choice. It's a question of how to represent

these communities in cultural institutions and artistic creation.

There are different dimensions to this issue. First is the question of representation in work or creative teams. Who are the artists on stage, and who are those with artistic authority—the stage directors, choreographers, and so on, who ultimately decide on the artistic orientations of the works? It's an important issue.

There is also the question, in terms of equity, of diversity representation in works of art, meaning: are we representing minority or minoritized communities as caricatures, or are we doing it in an intelligent, feeling way that is true to reality and to whom these people are?

Finally, there's also the question of public and professional recognition, which faces many obstacles, in terms for example of juries and their criteria for excellence, or the ways in which works are presented to the audience. We feel that we can gather all of this under the concept of equity. I've summarized it in a table—I'll conclude by quickly presenting it—with these three concepts and the fact that they didn't surface in institutions at the same time.

Accessibility: Disability movements in the '70s and '80s pushed for the adoption of the Quebec law on disability rights, much as was the case with the Accessible Canada Act this year at the federal level.

And the field of accessibility is really a series of adaptation strategies. This is done by specializing services, for example by making arrangements so that people with reduced mobility can access the space, even if the space wasn't originally designed for it. At other times, specialized services will be created for certain communities in response to specific needs. These adaptations for cultural offerings use a specialization logic.

There is another way of adapting spaces, and that is Universal Accessibility, which advocacy groups push for. It involves designing spaces from the start with services that everyone can use, regardless of their condition or reality. So there you have it for accessibility.

Inclusion: Mediation approaches, which are related to educational approaches and were already happening in institutions. These created

excitement about cultural participation, and it's a concept that is widely used today.

And finally, the concept of equity, in terms of how we can arrive at fair or equal representation of social, cultural and artistic diversity. In recent years, advocacy in this area was mainly seen by women artists, artists of colour, and Indigenous artists. Advocacy also stems from Deaf artists, disabled artists, and various other art communities, but in the public realm, these three communities are the most visible.

This gives us a kind of compass that can help us find our way in responding to advocacy. What we are saying is that if institutions put everything in place to be accessible, inclusive and fair—by following their own path, as Tamar said, because there is no one perfect solution—we will have made good progress.

I'll conclude on that thought.

Julie Tremble

Hello. Thank you for being here, thank you for the invitation. Thank you very much also for your presentations, they were very interesting and inspiring.

Preparing this presentation gave me a lot of ideas. It was very stimulating. I'm "old style," I have notes here that I will probably read, because I'm not very good at public speaking, it makes me a little shy.

As Tamar said earlier, Vidéographe is a centre for research and dissemination of the moving image. We're interested in experimental and independent works in video, animation, documentary, and digital categories. It's quite broad.

More specifically, our activities focus on distribution in festivals, galleries, and various cultural dissemination venues. We also do screenings, exhibitions, creation support and training for artists, as well as publication. We're interested in the accessibility of our services and our activities, on the one hand, because we want to contribute to increasing the number of voices and ways of doing that are expressed through the moving image,

and that enrich it. It's also because we want to share the works that we are curating with the greatest possible number of people.

I have to say that we started working on this about three years ago, so there's still a long road ahead. My presentation is a modest combination of initiatives, findings and ideas. I even followed the work plan that we were given! [laughs]

So barriers at Vidéographe are in terms of access to services for artists, and accessibility to the works that are shown. Firstly, our spaces aren't wheelchair-accessible. We have a non-standard ramp, which enables wheelchair users to enter the building, but beyond that point, our editing rooms aren't accessible, and neither are the training spaces. We've developed a building renovation project for universal accessibility.

Also, it must be said that our medium is complex. It's a very technical medium in itself, and it includes other obstacles: there is the equipment, but then also software.

When I met Tiphaine and the group at SPiLL a few years ago, in 2016 I think, we had a conversation and she told me that one of the biggest issues for Deaf artists was in finding professional development opportunities. Of course, professional development is important for all artists, and one of the things we chose as a solution was to provide training.

Our training was in French, but we experimented. At the request of an artist, we provided training with an interpreter. So there was the person giving the training, there was the interpreter, and there was a group of three people who were undergoing this training, which was about After Effects. It went really well. So then, we said to ourselves that this was something that could be done. And these solutions were in fact fairly simple ideas.

One other slightly more important initiative that we set up, also in professional development, was a creation research residency for Deaf artists. We worked with SPiLL again and particularly with Tiphaine, who helped us a lot, and gave us guidance to establish the framework of the residency. It's a broader framework than for our other residencies, because the plan was to be more flexible and to succeed in adapting to the project. Although I would say that we're already pretty flexible at Vidéographe,

really! [Laughs with the audience] Thanks!

Participants in the residency receive professional fees for their creation research work, and funding for their production budgets. We have regular meetings with the artists to ensure a follow-up and provide feedback, because it's more interesting for the artist to not to be alone with their project during a residency. We work with an interpreter if the person uses sign language, and we discuss the project's progression at every step. Afterwards, we organize public artist presentations in places other than Vidéographe, so that the artist's work will have a wider impact. And if work arose from the residence and the person is interested, we offer to distribute the work. The work then enters the collection, and is included in the "Vithèque" catalog on our website, and we can submit it to festivals. Next, there is also dissemination, which is done on different levels. The residency is held every two years, to give enough time to do the residency itself, and also to prepare it.

Two years ago, we welcomed a first artist, Sylvanie Tendron from France. She also took part in the residency at Est-Nord-Est with SPiLL. As part of her residency with us, she produced three new works. There are monobands, and also some work that can be more "installative." We did a presentation at Dazibao, where she introduced her work as a projection and presentation, as we are doing now, and another presentation during a visit with AXENÉO7, in Gatineau. She spent a week there, and she was also able to meet the community. Her presentation there was more in the form of an exhibition, or installation, where she arranged her work in space.

Afterwards, she agreed to add her entire corpus to our collection. We also do online programming on our site. These are free-access programs that are up on our "Vithèque" for three months. So we did this with a program of her work. Also, one of her pieces was integrated into a projection that we organized at Alexandraplatz this summer. It's like trying to find different and varied ways to support the work.

This year, we're welcoming Cai Glover, who's a choreographer and dancer. He'll be developing a choreography based on poetry in sign language, in ASL, and will make a video dance. We'll be giving a presentation at Dazibao, but we also want to stage a performance with another partner I'm thinking of in the Outaouais-Ottawa region… I already have this partner in

mind, but I can't tell you, because I haven't asked them yet, but I'm pretty sure it's going to be fine! [laughs] We can't wait, we're very excited. Working on this project enabled us to assess what was in place at Vidéographe, that is to say, not much, and to develop best practices and give ourselves more precise goals as well. We were able to meet resources who help us work better by following Deaf standards. For example, we made a video montage of a presentation by Sylvanie. But when we showed it to the interpreter we were working with, she told us: "This montage was done for hearing people. If you're Deaf, if you use sign language, it's completely inappropriate." So we said, "Ah, okay, very well," and she showed us how to make a video that would work for an artist's presentation. I think what's important, when you want to increase accessibility, is to get started and do a project, either a short presentation, or something more elaborate. It's by working that we can find perspective in our ways of doing, see our shortcomings, and look for solutions. We were talking earlier about not being afraid of making mistakes, of saying, "Well, at least I learned something!"

The steps we put in place, and that we take for specific projects can then be applied for other projects, so as to gradually integrate all these attitudes within all aspects of the organization, so that they become reflexes. If we don't do anything, it's not going to happen.

I also believe, truly deeply, that we must collaborate with partners when we want to set up these projects. Partners who are or know resources, strategies and better ways of doing things. This is to ensure that we take relevant actions that will reach the people we want to reach, and which will be useful, and not just for us, especially not just for us.

Now, as we were asked to bring concrete things to the table, my other concrete thing is a fabulous talent for budgets! [laughs] When you decide to embark on this path, I think it's a good idea to assess your space, your communication tools, your events and how they happen, and to give yourself concrete objectives. For example, this year we'd like to organize four artist presentations with interpreters. It depends on what you want to do.

Then, you assess it, and see how much it will cost. You put it in your annual budget, and that ensures you won't forget it, because you have a budget

line. Most importantly, it enables you to prioritize your actions according to the people who are there, the resources you have, and then to include these actions in a continuous development. One year, you'll take a few steps. The following year, you'll build on that. There is this line of continuity.

Now, I could go on talking about a lot of things. I'm very excited, because there's going to be a presentation on websites and interfaces, and so on. It's going to be fascinating, I can't wait. How do we set things up for projections? How do we set up experimental works? I still have questions about so many things. Images, for instance, for people who see less or can't see…

I'll stop here, except to mention that we've begun to work a lot with Deaf artists, but we're also very interested in other ideas or projects that people may have. The whole team is very excited about that. It's very stimulating intellectually, and artistically, and creatively.

In conclusion, I'll be presenting a video by Sylvanie, which she made during her residency. In the video, she signs a text by Virginie Despentes, a French feminist philosopher. The video is in LSF, so I'm going to show the text at the beginning, followed by the video, because I think for most people here, LSF is not… accessible.

(End of transcription)

Transcription and translation : Marie Lauzon, C. Tran. (Canada) & Nicole Champagne

To cite this conference: Tiphaine Girault, William-Jacomo Beauchemin, Julie Tremble, "Bonnes pratiques et modèles institutionnels [Best practices and institutional models]" (5 December 2019). Conference presented as part of OBORO and Spectrum Productions' *Interrogating Access* series. Available online: http://www.oboro.net/en/activity/best-practices-and-institutional-models-0

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